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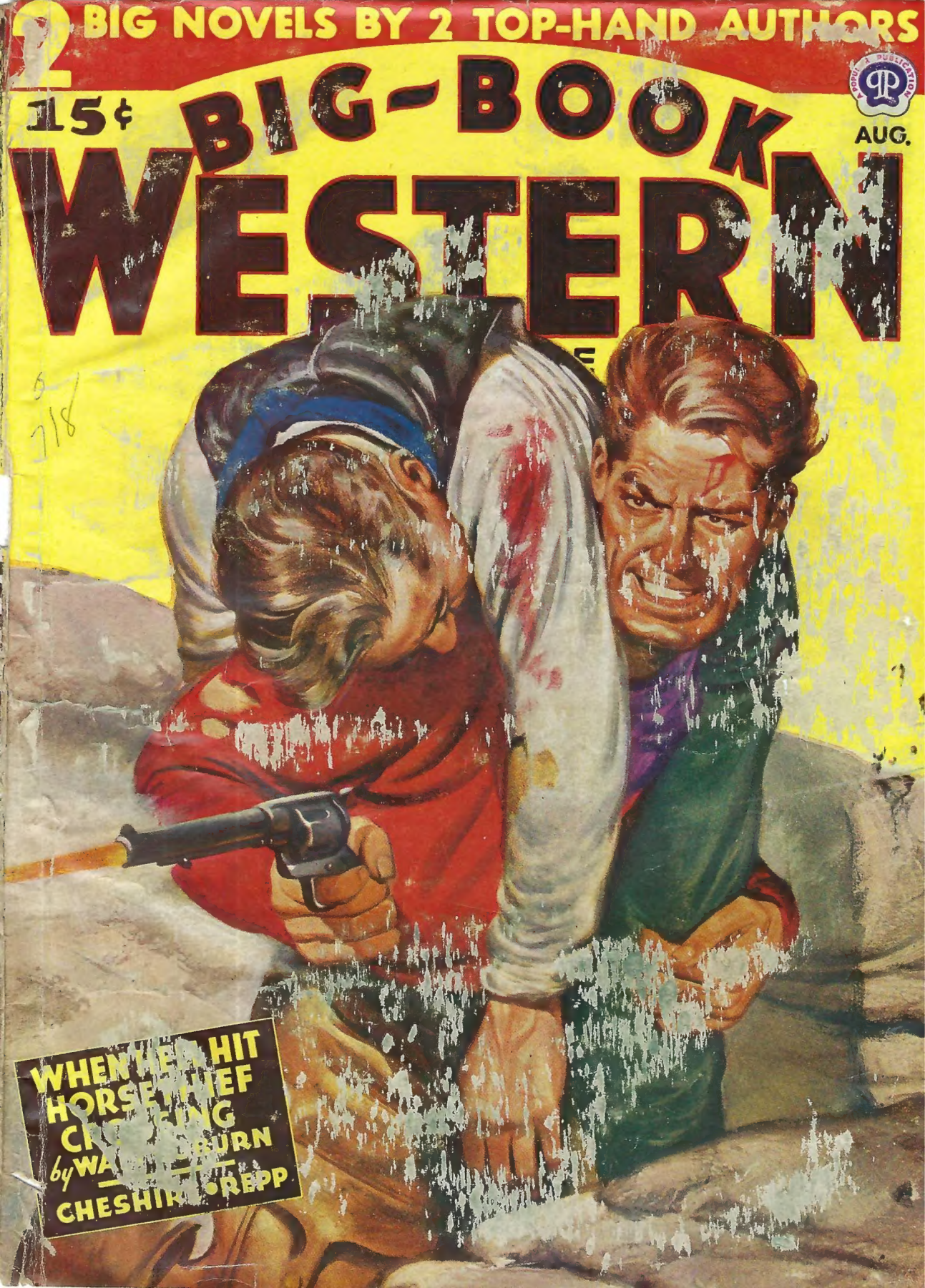

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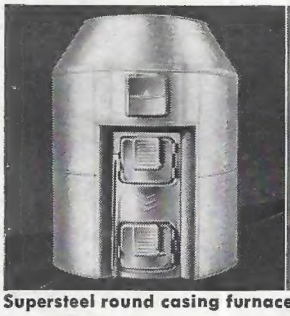

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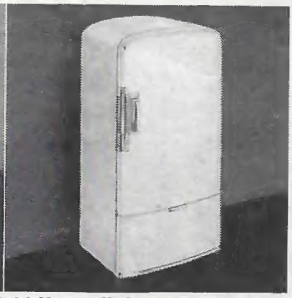

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Published monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., at 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, 16, Illinois. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter November 13, 1945, at the Post Office, at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1946, by Popular Publications, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 15c. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, $1.80; other countries 50c additional. Send subscriptions to 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. For advertising rates, address Sam J. Perry, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsiblity for their return. Any resemblance between any character, appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional. Printed in the U.S.A.

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★ ROUND-UP ★

AFTER old Cimarron George Bolds bought himself an antelope ranch back in the days when the West was wild, woolly and wilful, he found he had complaints. Well, we've had complaints, too, of late. Folks, seems like, want more stories! If we can't give more, their letters say, they'd like for us to publish this magazine twice a month. Darn' well tootin', we'd admire to do just that—but there is still a paper shortage! So, to try to make everybody happy, starting in September, *Big-Book Western* will be about one-third as big again as it is now!

This means 128 pages instead of the present 98. It means we'll add 32 pages of double-barreled, quick-trigger Western fiction. More than 20,000 words of it. There'll be just that much more room for your favorite authors to swing their loops. At the present time, this is about all the editors of *Big-Book* can do to try to meet the demand for more Westerns. Perhaps, later, we can do better. Shore hope so. So, starting with the September issue, you'll find *Big-Book Western* in 128 pages. More stories! More action! More drama! We'll have the same top-notch authors and all the new good ones we can dig up. The price will be two bits. Come in, Cimarron, and tell us of your troubles!

ONE morning I was about a mile north of Dodge, when I saw a fellow coming on a horse who seemed to be in a great hurry. He must have known I was a sucker by my looks because he asked, "Do you want a job?"

"What at?" I asked.

He said, "Herding antelope."

I informed him, "I've never seen one."

Then he remarked, "Just like sheep, only a little more rangy. I was working on an antelope ranch up north. I just got word to come east, as there has been a death in the family. You can have my job, but you'll need a horse. I'll sell you this horse and saddle for forty dollars, and the job pays five dollars per day."

After some dickering he seemed to be in a hurry, and said, "I'll give you the horse and saddle and job for your belt, sixgun and ten dollars."

I was sure that was a bargain, and asked, "How will I find the ranch?"

"When you get up north a mile," said he, "you will see some antelope off to your left that strayed from the ranch. Just follow them and they'll head for the home range."

We closed the deal. I'd lost my gun and ten dollars, but had a good horse, saddle and job. He started running towards town and I started to locate antelope.

I found the antelope, but could not get in a mile of them. This chase continued for some time. I was all in and so was my new horse. I then saw six horsemen coming towards me, and they was in a rush. They surrounded me with drawn sixguns, and the leader said, "We got you. You damn murderer and horse thief."

I then saw a badge pinned on the fellow's vest, and knew he was the law.

One of the other men remarked, "No trees here or we'd hang him and save time."

With all my pleading, they laughed at my story. They searched me but found no gun. One fellow said, "Sheriff, he's only a kid. The one we want is much older."

The sheriff said, "It's only five miles to Dodge. We'll take you there to the sheriff."

They tied my hands to the saddlehorn and started for Dodge.

In passing Wrights store, Bob was standing out front. He saw me surrounded by a posse, with my hands tied to the saddle, and the posse was headed for the jail. Bob located Bat Masterson, and they was at the jail when the posse arrived.

They untied my hands and we all went into the jail. Bob and Bat knew the sheriff, as he was from a north county. The sheriff said, "We caught this fellow up north on a stolen horse. He's also wanted for murder."

Bob and Bat was both grinning when Pat Shugrue said, "George, tell us your side."

I related all about the horse, and the job of herding antelope. They was all laughing and I thought them crazy.

Pat asked me to describe the fellow who'd sold me the horse. When I was through, Pat said, "I received a circular this morning for a criminal. Later I saw a fellow running for the east-bound train and he was a stranger here and tallied with the description. He's back there in a cell."

When he was brought out, I saw he was the same fellow that played me for a sucker. He had my gun and the ten dollars when the sheriff threw him in jail. Pat returned my gun and the ten and told the posse to take their man. The circular said, "$1000 reward."

I WAS fast growing up for my age. I'd had many experiences and some was serious. Bat again gave me one of his lectures, saying, "Never give up your gun unless to a sheriff or marshal. Never allow anyone to examine your gun. Don't believe any hard-luck stories from anyone. You'll live longer."

Thanks, Cimarron!

Now don't forget, you rawhides, that starting with the September issue, you'll be buying a bigger, better *Big-Book Western Magazine*. One hundred and twenty-eight pages!

Adios till then!

—THE EDITOR

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THE GRAND EXIT OF EL DORADO JOHNNY

By T. N. DUROSKO

WHEN the news circulated through Virginia City during the 1860s that the youthful newcomer, El Dorado Johnny, had made up his mind to provoke the "Chief" of the lode, Langford Peel, into a gun fight, the citizenry grew excited and looked for safe observation posts from which to witness the incident.

Many miners tried to discourage the likeable teen-age youth from challenging the veteran Peel, who already had five notches on his gun-butt. But El Dorado had made up his mind. During his first two months at the diggings, in 1861, he felt that he had not progressed as rapidly as he should have. He was not satisfied with receiving small sums of money paid to lesser-known gunmen for protection of miners and their interests. To get to the top and receive wages near the $200 per day scale, he must shoot down Peel.

Determined to do the job in grand style, Johnny felt that he should "look nice" and raise the unkempt appearance standard which had been set by previous "Chiefs." So, before he sent out his challenge, he went into the nearest barber shop. "Fix me up fit," he said. "I'm going after a bad man."

The barber gave him a shave, trimmed his whiskers and marcelled his hair. And the bootblack polished his boots until he could see his own reflection in them.

Leaving the barber shop, El Dorado squared his shoulders, adjusted his gun-belt, and then headed for Pat Lynch's saloon where he knew Peel could generally be found.

"Any Chiefs about?" he inquired as he pushed aside the two swinging doors.

"You probably intended that remark for me," said the soft-spoken Peel who was standing at the bar.

"Any one can take it up that likes," replied Johnny with a grin on his face.

"Very well," rejoined Peel, "we'll settle it right now. Come out into the street."

El Dorado nodded his approval, turned and walked out the door to the unpaved street. Peel followed as far as the swinging door and then hesitated to see what his challenger planned. As Johnny wheeled to aim at him, Peel drew and fired a shot that caught him squarely between the eyes and dropped the kid dead in his tracks.

A murmur rippled through the crowds which had collected behind shutters and barrels.

Peel, himself, was affected by his opponent's early age.

"George," he called, turning to the bartender, "run up to Brown's and tell him to come down here and fix up El Dorado. Tell him to spare no expense, but to give the best he has in the shop and I will pay for it."

Brown arrived within a half hour and made Johnny as pleasant a looking corpse as the boys at the diggings ever turned out to bury. They laid him out in Pat Lynch's saloon in a magnificent casket, beautifully upholstered, silver-mounted. They smoothed his hair, recurled his whiskers, cleaned and pressed his clothes. From Friday until Sunday Johnny lay in state.

During those days, seven bartenders in white coats with diamond-studded shirts were kept constantly busy handling refreshments over the bar to the thirsty hundreds who dropped in to take a last look at El Dorado. For all the Comstockers liked Johnny even more now because he died like a true gunman—with a pistol in his hand.

On the following Sunday, the corpse was escorted to the cemetery by the largest funeral procession that had ever been seen in Washoe.

Leading the procession was a band which played dirges. Behind it followed most of the populace of Virginia City in a cavalcade of slouched hats, unpressed jeans, and whiskered faces.

Pete Larkin, soon afterward hanged for murder, was master-of-ceremonies at the grave. He doffed his hat, placed it between his knees, and then read several lines from a battered Bible.

When Johnny's body had been consigned to the earth, the procession reformed, the band struck up *When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again,* and the boys of the Comstock marched back to the side of Sun Mountain.

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WHEN HELL HIT HORSETHIEF CROSSING

Boot-tough and war-necked were both the Rocking R and Pothook riders, but even as they cursed one another, they fought back-to-back against drought, blizzard and savage marauders. . . . Then, like a spark in a powder-keg, a single bushwhack bullet unleashed from the red-hot depths of hell the never-sleeping demon that changes decent cowpunchers into cold, ruthless merchants of death, who laugh as they kill!

Chapter I

WHISKEY-TALK BREEDS WAR

IT WAS whiskey talk that started what promised to become the bloodiest range war in Montana history. And if it had happened anywhere but inside Jake Kaneen's saloon at Horsethief Crossing, on the Missouri River, it would have been fought, then and there, within four walls and promptly forgotten about. Because it wasn't the first time that loud-mouthed Old Roarin' Bob Rutherford had bellowed complaints against his neighbors. Roarin' Bob had bellered and pawed for so many years that his cursing lost its strength and his threats wore themselves out in their own storm.

"Tell that old man of yourn," yelled Rutherford, "that I'm plumb sick and tired a-winterin' his pore, weak Pothook cattle. You tell Jay Hayes that, by hell, I'm a-butcherin' every damned Pothook steer that puts on taller eatin' my Rockin' R grass! Moreover, I'm puttin' into my Rockin' R iron every dadgummed, doggoned calf one of them pore cows drops on my side of the river, to pay fer their winter's feed. You tell that daddy of yourn that, by the eternal hell, I'm declarin' war on the Pothooks!"

"No need for me to relay the message,

Smashing Novel of a Montana Blackleg War

By WALT COBURN

Johnny leaned from the saddle and grabbed him.

Roarin' Bob," Johnny Hayes grinned. "It's only ten miles from here to the ranch. Unless my dad's sleepin' off a bad jag, he's a-listenin'. Everytime it thunders from over on the south side of the river, Jay Hayes nods his head and says, "That's Roarin' Bob Rutherford bellyachin' again."

Johnny Hayes was in his twenties. Tall, slim, long-legged, tow-headed, with sunlight in his puckered sky blue eyes and his good nature showing in the wide spread of his mouth. He liked to rep with the Rocking R wagon on the spring and fall round-ups, he claimed, just to hear Roarin' Bob Rutherford roar. But range gossip said it was Rutherford's only daughter Rea who took tow-headed Johnny south of the wide Missouri whenever an excuse offered.

The war talk should have laughed itself out then and there. A twinkle glinted in the black eyes that peered from under Roarin' Bob Rutherford's craggy brows, and a grin started behind the drooping iron gray mustache.

But Jake Kaneen was tending bar and he pushed his hard paunch against it as he leaned across to pour booze into big Stud Rutherford's empty glass. Stud was Roarin' Bob's oldest son. Big, tough, black-eyed, with coarse straight black hair and high cheekbones that betrayed his quarter-breed Sioux blood.

Stud had his back to the old pine board bar, a bootheel hooked on the rail, leaning his heavy-shouldered bulk on his elbows. Stud was more than half drunk. The rotgut booze set fire to his Injun blood. Sober, Stud Rutherford was quiet, hard-working, easy to get along with. He ran the Rocking R wagon and was easy to work for because he was a good cowman and knew what he wanted from his own men and from the cowhands repping for other outfits. Drunk, Stud Rutherford was ornery.

Stud's black brows pulled into a scowl. His round-up was camped on the Rocking R's south bank of the river. Since daybreak they had been shoving Pothook and other cattle in a dozen lesser rep brands back across the Missouri to the north side. Swimming cattle is a wet and tedious and sometimes dangerous job.

Now it was night and the last of the cattle shoved back across the river and the job done. And Stud Rutherford was getting drunk. He liked to drink alone. Take a jug off into the brush where he could sit down with it and drink himself into a brooding silence so that the booze would soak into his blood and warm his heart and saturate his brain and make him forget that he was a quarter-breed Injun.

Into his dreams would come a girl with hair the color of Montana placer gold and eyes, heavily fringed, blue as the rain-washed Montana sky. Her voice as liquid clear and gay as the song of a meadowlark in the spring when wild roses bloom. . . .

June. . . . June Hayes. Pothook Jay Hayes' niece. She taught school at Landusky, in the Little Rockies. June Hayes was an orphan. She called herself a "poor relation" who was too prideful to accept Pothook charity, so she got herself a schoolmarm job. And she was the girl of Stud Rutherford's dreams and the one person on earth who made him feel ashamed of the fact that his mother was a squaw. A half-breed squaw. June Hayes, with her golden hair and blue eyes and fair skin. June Hayes was a white girl. . . .

"You goin' to stand back, Stud," Jake Kaneen's whiskey voice whispered harshly in his ear, "and let Pothook Johnny Hayes insult your father?"

STUD RUTHERFORD roused himself from his brooding. The whiskey splashed in his glass and he gulped it down. The voice of his big cattleman father rang in Stud's ears.

"Why, you half-baked, bald-faced, tow-headed young whippersnapper! When I was your age I spoke when I was spoke to and never outa turn. When I addressed a man with gray in his hair, by the eternal, I addressed that gentleman as 'Sir.' What you need is a rawhide quirtin'. A wet ketch-rope doubled and laid with a heavy hand acrost your rump and withers. Breedin' tells, in horse or man. Pothook Jay Hayes takes to his coyote hole when he hears the rumblin' thunder acrost the river, because there's chain lightnin' behind that thunder. It makes him shiver in his boots! Breedin' tells, young man. I got a mind to teach you proper manners—spank your hide with a rawhide quirt till you yap-yap like a coyote whelp. I'm Roarin' Bob Rutherford from the Rockin' R!"

"And you're drunk, sir," Johnny Hayes said. The grin thinned to a flat-lipped line. The color was draining from his tanned, lean face. "Too drunk to hit. And too old! But sober enough to realize that Pothook Hayes ain't here to take his own part! Your roarin' don't scare me, sir. It kinda makes me want to step outside and puke!"

Hayes knew he had the backing of the six cowpunchers who had, like himself, been repping with the Rocking R wagon on the spring round-up. They had cut their strings of horses from the Rocking R remuda and their beds were at the Pothook line camp across the river.

Johnny Hayes was only half joshing now. Roaring Bob Rutherford got on a man's nerves after a few hours. Even his son, Stud, had scowled and shaken his head when they saw

Roarin' Bob ride up in time for supper, half drunk, as usual; indignant because they had crossed the big stray herd before he had a chance to ride through it and get his own tally on the cattle that had drifted south across the river on last winter's ice and used his Rocking R hay and grass to put on taller.

Only Jake Kaneen had a welcome for Roarin' Bob Rutherford. Jake Kaneen had drifted up from Wyoming last year. He was firmly established at Horsethief Crossing when the Chinook winds cut away the deep drifts that held the Montana cow country in a snow-bound grip. Kaneen had taken over the log saloon and trading post and was getting the ferryboat and cable in shape for launching when the ice broke up in the river. Kaneen and his eighteen-year-old red-headed daughter Linda, who kept house for him and made eyes at every man who showed up. She claimed to be eighteen but looked and acted older and more sophisticated than the average eighteen-year-old cow country girl. And it was a Chinaman who did the cooking and housework.

"Uncle Dan Taylor?" Jake Kaneen answered the questions that men asked when they found Uncle Dan gone and this big, paunchy, grizzled, red-headed stranger running the place. "Well, sir, the pore old feller died durin' the winter. Pneumonia. We was snow-bound. Couldn't git no doctor. Linda nursed him night and day. She cried like a baby when he died. Uncle Dan was her gran'paw on her mother's side. Left her the place in his will. Store, saloon, livestock, ferryboat, the lock, stock an' barrel. It's in black and white, signed and witnessed. Linda's got roses growin' on pore ol' Uncle Dan's grave. . . . Have a drink on his memory, gents! To Uncle Dan. Drink hearty!"

Jake Kaneen welcomed Roarin' Bob Rutherford with a huge freckled hand that the big cowman either did not see or chose not to notice. Kaneen's bloodshot green eyes had narrowed. His freckled hand had shoved the bar bottle at the big cattleman. His whiskey voice rasped, "It's a pleasure to meet the great Bob Rutherford."

"The hell you say!" Roarin' Bob had smelled the bottle before he poured himself a drink.

Color had mottled Kaneen's beefy face. He'd grinned it off. But his eyes were cold as winter ice.

Chapter II

"THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES. . . ."

KANEEN was wishing Pothook Hayes was here now, to take his own part. To lock horns with Roarin' Bob Rutherford. But this wasn't a bad deal, as it stood right now.

Johnny Hayes was headed for the door when Stud Rutherford threw his empty glass against the far wall and shoved his bulk away from the bar to block Hayes' way.

"Not till I give you somethin' to actually puke up!" Stud grabbed the front of Hayes' shirt and yanked. The ripping blue flannel made an unpleasant sound.

The uglier sound was the *spat* of Stud's open-handed slap that caught the side of Johnny Hayes' jaw and rocked his head sidewise. The hat tumbled off Johnny's tow head. He twisted sidewise and the front of his shirt ripped away. He ducked, and Stud's follow-up punch grazed the top of his head. He went in under the wild swing and put one hundred-and-eighty pounds into the short hook to Stud's belly. A looping right smashed into the quarter-breed's nose and mouth. Blood spurted. A wild swing hit Johnny's face and it felt like a mule kicking in the whole front of his head. He reeled backward, his spur shank caught in something and he went down.

Johnny rolled over and over, his arms protecting his face and head, and he landed against the bar and scrambled to his feet and was braced with his back against the bar when Stud charged him.

Hayes gripped the bar with one hand and kicked Stud in the belly. The breed's face twisted with pain and then his two hundred pounds of raw bone and beefy muscle were on top of Johnny Hayes and they went down in a tangle of arms and legs.

The saloon was in an uproar. The six reps and about twice that many Rocking R cowhands were battling, rough and tumble and no holds barred. Card tables and chairs overturned and smashed. The men were gouging, biting, kicking, punching. And above the din of the free-for-all roared the huge voice of Bob Rutherford.

"Wipe up the dirty floor with 'em, you Rockin' R sons! Earn your wages!"

Roarin' Bob was standing on a poker table in a far corner of the log saloon, a half-emptied whiskey bottle in his hand.

Jake Kaneen was crouched behind his liquor-stained pine board bar, only his head showing. His eyes were blood-shot and green, his teeth bared in a wicked grin.

It was night outside and the only light in the saloon came from a big old brass lamp that hung by brass chains from the ridgelog.

Kaneen picked up an empty bottle and then let it go in a swift, sure, overhand throw. It struck the lamp chimney and smashed it and the lampwick guttered and went out. At that instant the heavy explosion of a gun filled the dark saloon.

Roarin' Bob Rutherford's voice choked: "Hellamighty! I'm shot!"

The cattleman's shout had a startling effect. The fighting stopped almost as abruptly as it had commenced. There was the smell of burnt gunpowder in the log saloon. Its acrid odor seemed to obliterate, for the time being, the mingled smells of sweat and booze and tobacco smoke. There was an ominous hush. Then Stud Rutherford's voice sounded, strained, tense, dangerous.

"Strike a light, Kaneen. Shed some light in here."

Jake Kaneen came up from behind the bar with a lighted candle. His sweat-beaded face looked mottled in the flickering candle light.

Matches flared up. Stud Rutherford was crouched on one knee beside the overturned table in the corner, staring down into the face of his father.

Roarin' Bob lay doubled up on his side, propped on one elbow. His hand was pressed against his groin, under his belt. Blood oozed from the heavy wool cloth of his California pants to stain his hand. His leathery face was gray. Pain seared his hard black eyes. He spoke to his big son.

"Cut away my pants, Stud. Hold the light close. If it's clean red blood, gimme a drink of likker. But if I'm shot in the guts, clear the place and foller 'em out. And lemme have my gun. . . ." The bluster had gone from his voice, leaving it calm.

They knew what he meant. Kaneen fetched a bottle of booze and the lighted candle.

Stud Rutherford's black eyes swept the crowd, then came to a rest when he saw Johnny Hayes backed against the wall with a six-shooter in his hand.

"I'll pick it up later," Stud Rutherford was cold sober now. "Take your reps and git acrost the river."

"If you figger I shot your father, Stud, you're locoed Injun drunk."

"I said," Stud gritted, "git! Put the wide Missouri between your yella hounds and my men. There ain't a Rockin' R cowpuncher won't fight for Roarin' Bob. Now clear out!"

Hayes motioned the other reps out the door. Then backed out, his gun in his hand.

Jake Kaneen had fetched a bucket of water and a soiled bar towel. Stud had the big blade of his jackknife open. Slitting away the heavy wool pants and under-drawers. Bathing away the blood. His fingers probing cautiously. Then he grinned flatly into his father's squinted black eyes.

"Cut a rip in your thigh. Clean blood. I'll git it stopped. Lay back and work on the likker. You'll live to be a hundred. . . ."

THE other reps were mounted and shoving their horses into the river. Johnny was getting ready to mount, his saddle cinch loose for the swim, when Linda Kaneen's husky voice sounded suddenly at his shoulder.

"You letting that big Injun run you off, Johnny?"

"Where'd you come from, Linda?"

"Nowhere. I was watching through the window. You had the big 'breed Stud licked when the light went out. Don't rabbit, Johnny."

She stood up close to him in the shadows and her heavy red hair was in his face. She was pressed close to him, her hands on his shoulders. Her lips were brushing his ear, then his check, and when he spoke her mouth smothered his words and she was whispering as her warm red lips clung to his mouth and her arms were around his neck.

Her lips twisted hard against his battered mouth. Her voice was husky.

"I can taste your blood in my mouth, Johnny. . . I like the taste of it! Don't coyote, Johnny! Sooner or later you'll have to kill Stud Rutherford, and now's your best time. I'll show you where to hide . . . at my cabin. I'll get you away; I'll go with you, then, across the river. . . . You got old man Rutherford. Get the big Stud and it wipes out the tribe. We don't count the little squaw Rea, do we, Johnny?"

Linda Kaneen used some kind of a heavy perfume on her dress and on her skin. It was in her heavy red hair, clogging Johnny Hayes' nostrils. He felt drunk from it. She was unlike any girl he had ever known. Bold as a man, yet more of a woman than any girl he had ever met. He hadn't known many girls in his life. Her lips kept twisting against his bleeding, torn mouth. He had to put his arms around her to keep his balance in the dark. She clung to him and her fingers were tangled in his sweat-matted thick yellow hair.

"Do we, Johnny?"

"Do we what?" His voice sounded choked.

"Count the little half-breed Rea! You belong to me; I want you, Johnny Hayes, and I take what I want! You're mine, now. I'm playing for keeps. . . ."

Spurs jingled. Bootheels clumped. A man's big frame bulked in the nearby darkness. Not twenty feet away Stud Rutherford's voice sounded in the dark shadows.

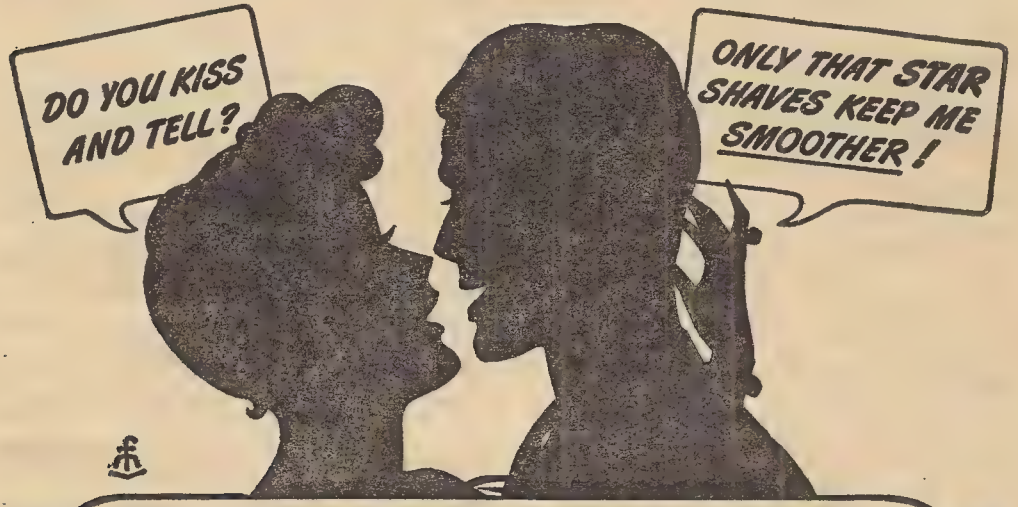
"You pick a hell of a time for lollygaggin'! Hit the river, Johnny! Roarin' Bob's a long ways from dead, and the outfit's gittin' nasty. You kin pick this up where you left off some moonlit night. And don't claw for a gun or I'll gut-shoot you! And if ever you look cross-eyed at my sister again, I'll kill you like I'd kill a hydrophobia skunk. Now hit the river!"

"Kill him, Johnny!" Linda Kaneen's lips whispered against his ear. *"Kill the big breed!"*

Johnny broke away from her. He was

clammy with cold sweat and his brain milled with confused, bewildered thoughts. He knew why Stud did not pull a gun trigger. Stud was as sick inside as he, Johnny, was. Stud Rutherford was a few years older than Johnny. When he was a kid, Johnny had swum the wide, swift Missouri many a time to sit on the corral and watch Stud work with a string of broncs. Stud would let young Johnny ride the gentle 'uns when the rough edges had been taken off a bronc. Stud was his big hero. Stud had taught him a lot about handling broncs and punching cows. They'd been pardners. Then the past few years things had changed. Bob Rutherford and Johnny's father had locked horns and Stud had changed. Stud had grown bitter: calling Roarin' Bob a squawman and himself a damned breed! Calling little Rea a squaw. . . . Drunk, abusive, ornery Injun drunk. . . .

Memories continued to flow in Hayes' addled brain: "Come on to the ranch for supper. We're havin' prairie dog stew, Injun style! Didn't you know the Rutherfords are gut-eaters? Hell, yes! When my mother was alive she made and wore her own moccasins. My kid sister will make you a pair of purty beaded moccasins!"



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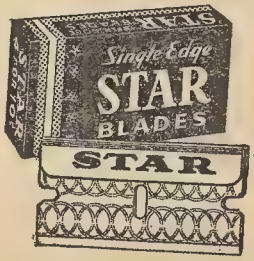

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Rea had burst into tears. Johnny had torn into Stud, white-lipped, with a fury he never tried to explain. He had hit Stud over the head with a wagon-spoke. Almost killed Stud. . . .

Sobered up, Stud had never mentioned it. Johnny repped with the Rocking R wagon again that fall. It was only when he got drunk that Stud Rutherford showed his Injun'. Stud was almost sober now.

Johnny forked his horse and rode into the river, Linda Kaneen's husky laugh like a blacksnake whip across his back. Then he heard her voice. Husky, vibrant. . . .

"Kiss me again like that, Injun! You're a rough brute! Fetch me that white-livered Johnny's cottontail scalp for this kiss, Injun. . . ."

Johnny cut one quick look back across his shoulder as his horse lunged into swimming water. He saw Stud Rutherford holding Linda Kaneen in his arms. They stood close together, shadows blending into one shape in the moonlight. . . .

Chapter III

MISSOURI RIVER KIDNAP

HATRED breeds hatred. Its poison seeped through the blood of every man that worked for the Rutherford Rocking R and for Jay Hayes' Pothook. And at least three women felt its virulence.

Both home ranches were located twenty-five or thirty miles from the banks of the Missouri River, beyond the head of the badlands. But each outfit had winter line camps strung along the river, the Rocking R on the south side, the Pothook on the north bank. And in addition to the hay crews working there in summer, both outfits had staked out armed line-riders. These Winchester men rode in pairs and patrolled their section along the Missouri, lazing in the shade of the giant cottonwoods during the day and standing armed guard at night.

"Keep your damned Pothook cattle north of the Missouri!" Roarin' Bob Rutherford bellowed. "Or, by the eternal, I'll beef 'em!"

"I'm puttin' a bounty on the hide of every Rockin' R tough cowhand that crosses to the Pothook side of the river," Jay Hayes sent word to Rutherford. "Ten dollars a head. That's as much as ary Rockin' R man is worth on the hoof or in a pine box. I'll send you a bill fer the boxes!"

Tall, rawboned, ramrod-backed Jay Hayes was only half joshing at first. He took a certain delight in ribbing Rutherford into pawing dirt and bellering. Till the slobber strung out, Jay Hayes said, like slobber from an old bull that's bin whupped out of the herd.

Then the sparkle froze in the lanky Pothook cowman's puckered blue eyes and the grin on his leathery face flattened to a grim line. He oiled and cleaned his six-shooter and saddle gun. Because the first man killed was a Pothook cowboy.

"If that's the way it's goin' to be, son," Jay Hayes told Johnny, "have at it."

The Pothook cowpuncher had been killed at the line camp across the river from Jake Kaneen's Horsethief Crossing, a mile below the ferry cable. Shot in the back. Jay Hayes had sent the man down there to work the brushy river bottom for cows with unbranded calves that had been missed on the spring round-up. A few days later Kaneen sent one of the river breeds from his hay crew with a note to the Pothook home ranch below the Little Rockies. The note said there was a dead Pothook cowboy at the line camp and what did Jay Hayes want Kaneen to do with the carcass?

Hayes took Johnny and two men with him. They found the murdered cowboy wrapped in his bed tarp in the old icehouse. Jay Hayes took Johnny and rode up to the north side of the crossing and signaled for the ferryboat.

Jake Kaneen came over for them. It was the first time Kaneen had ever met Jay Hayes. The quart-a-day saloon man had a grin of welcome on his sweat-beaded beefy face. His blood-shot green eyes were like polished bottle glass. He greeted the Pothook cowman and his son with a whiskey voice that was meant to convey a hearty welcome.

"I bin lookin' forward to meetin' Pothook Jay Hayes! Well, well, well! It's a pleasure!" He wiped the palm of his big freckled hand, holding it out.

Jay Hayes sat his horse stiff-backed. He rode a long stirrup. There was no answering warmth, false or real, on his lean, leathery clean-shaved face. His puckered blue eyes were frosted. He looked at Jake Kaneen's proffered hand. Then straight into Kaneen's green eyes.

"Old Uncle Dan Taylor"—Jay Hayes had a quiet voice—"was a grand old river man. But you have all the earmarks of a blackleg scoun'rel. It's my firm opinion that you murdered ol' Uncle Dan Taylor when you moved in here with your Chinaman and the red-headed young hussy you claim is your daughter. I've had a look at you. Now take that mud scow back to the Rutherford side of the river. Roarin' Bob must have a strong stomach. If ever you fetch this mud scow over to the Pothook side again, I'll have the cable cut. I give Uncle Dan Taylor a lifetime lease to the land he needed on this side. That lease canceled itself out when Uncle Dan died.

"Now, if you've got that clear in your skull, git on back to your saloon. I've put all

my Pothook men on your Injun list. I'll fire the best man I've got on my books if he so much as smells the cork on a jug or bottle of your rotgut booze. Git outa my sight, Kaneen. You rile me."

Pothook Hayes made his declaration without lifting his voice. Jake Kaneen read what was in the frosty, puckered blue eyes of the stiff-backed cattleman. And fear crawled like a snake through his guts.

There was a small cabin on the ferry boat that housed its machinery. While Jay Hayes and his son Johnny sat their horses on the river bank, the door of the cabin opened. Linda Kaneen stood there, a faint smile on her freckled face.

SHE wore faded old denim overalls and a blue cotton blouse with the sleeves rolled above her elbows, open at the throat and close fitting over her well-rounded figure. Her heavy red hair was parted in the middle and plaited in two thick braids that came below her slim waist. Her skin was tanned, with freckles sprinkled across her nose and cheeks. Her black-fringed eyes were deep green. She looked younger now, tomboyish and healthy. But her husky laugh was mocking, and it belonged to the Linda Kaneen who had kissed the fresh blood from a man's smashed mouth. She was a feline animal. Her purring laugh could turn quickly into a snarl.

She was Jake Kaneen's true daughter. No doubt about that relationship when you saw her green eyes. She was dangerous. She would fight and she would use all her woman's weapons.

Jay Hayes stared at the girl. Then he lifted his sweat-stained Stetson hat and bowed stiffly across his saddlehorn. There was something like admiration in his cold blue eyes.

"I take back what I called the little lady," Pothook Jay Hayes said. And there was a strange smile twisting his hard mouth. "If I was forty years younger, I'd enter the race. Damned if I wouldn't. Your blackleg father has by some miracle sired a thoroughbred."

Linda Kaneen flushed. She dropped a curtsy to the old cowman's salute. Her laughter rippled. The sunlight reflected in her eyes was like the sun shining into deep green water. She stepped from the cabin doorway and came across the wide flat planks with a lithe, easy swiftness to stand on the high end of the ferryboat, her head on a level with the eyes of the mounted cowmen. She was breathing quickly, her lips parted to show white strong teeth.

"Coming from you, sir," she said, "I think that is the finest compliment I've ever had paid me. Thank you. And you wouldn't need to be forty years younger to stand a good chance of winning. You've got what your son and Stud Rutherford and these younger fools have not. I'd never, never make the mistake of throwing myself at your head. But I would go through hell and high water to gain your respect and friendship. Something I've never had from any man on earth, because I didn't want it and therefore put no price on it. That is, I didn't until you tipped your hat and bowed—and Jake Kaneen's red-headed brat heard a man call her a lady!"

Linda stood there, high-chinned, her green eyes starry, her voice vibrant. You could see the fast pulse beat in her throat.

Johnny was staring at the girl. This was not Kaneen's daughter who made eyes at every man who rode up. Not the she-wildcat who had kissed fresh blood from his smashed mouth and begged him to kill his best friend to win her love. Not the brat who called him a rabbit and turned away from him to throw herself into the big arms of Stud Rutherford.

This was a girl with braided hair who humbled herself before a grizzled cowman old enough to be her father, and it was as if all the rest was no more than a soiled garment that she had thrown off in the daylight and stood in faded patched denim and cotton, barefooted, making a splendid bid for the respect of a man who had seen into her heart.

Linda's small hands clenched into fists until her knuckles showed white. She was choking back a sob.

Jake Kaneen stood there on wide-spread legs, staring at his daughter as though she were a stranger. His graying red brows beetled in a scowl. His blood-shot eyes were a little glazed.

Pothook Jay Hayes reined his horse alongside the high end of the old ferryboat. His long arm reached out and around the girl's slim waist and he shifted his weight to his left stirrup as he swung her straddle of his horse behind his saddle cantle. And there was a long-barreled six-shooter in his other hand. The gun pointed at Jake Kaneen.

"I'm takin' this child away from you, Kaneen. Bother me now and I'll gut-shoot you. You understand?"

Kaneen's beefy face was mottled. His blood-shot green eyes hardened. Cold sweat beaded his hide and trickled down his face. It darkened his dirty shirt with a spreading stain as if the poison booze that soddened his bulk was oozing from every pore. His voice, when it finally broke from his bull-necked, corded throat, was a croaking sound.

"I'll kill you for this! I'll kill you, mister. . . ."

"Mebbyso—mebby not." Jay Hayes' voice was quiet. "You must have bin a man once, or this child's mother would never have married you. Unless the rotgut booze has killed that manhood with its poison, Kaneen, you won't kill the gent that's givin' your child her right

to a decent happiness. Take your scow back acrost the river. I'm done with you, Kaneen!"

JAKE KANEEN moved with fumbling swiftness getting the cumbersome ferryboat under way. The clank of the machinery inside the cabin sounded loud. They saw Kaneen yank the cork from a jug with his big teeth and spit it out and drink the raw whiskey as though it were water as the current swung the ferryboat out into the channel and across.

Linda sat behind Jay Hayes' saddle, her hands gripping the grizzled cowman's broad shoulders. The color drained from her face until the freckles stood out like brown lumps. Her eyes, tear dimmed, stared out across the river, watching her father.

The ferryboat slid up to its landing on the south bank. They saw Jake Kaneen tying up the boat. Then they saw a man lurch out of the log saloon and come with a big, lurching, drunken gait toward the ferryboat. There was no mistaking the powerful bulk of Stud Rutherford. He had a bottle gripped in his hand. Or a gun. The sunlight reflected on its shining surface.

"Where's Linda?" Rutherford's voice had the deep resonance of his father's.

Kaneen pointed across the river. "The Pothook Hayes outfit's taken her away from me. You want her that bad, Injun, go after her. . . ."

Jay Hayes reined his horse and headed for the line camp barn. Johnny rode alongside. His father motioned him on.

"Saddle the dead man's horse for the little lady, son. You'll have to shorten the stirrups to fit her. And while you're about it, pull up that slack in your jaw."

There was a chuckle in the grizzled cowman's voice. He reached up and took one of the small hands that gripped his shoulder. Turning in his saddle, he said, "You're bein' shanghaied, young 'un! Now's the time to step down if you want to change your mind."

"I meant what I said," Linda said. She looked out across the river and saw Stud Rutherford on the sandy bank. He drained the whiskey bottle and threw it, empty, into the muddy river. He stood on wide-spread legs, swaying a little. He was cursing in a thick voice. Linda Kaneen shuddered. Hayes gripped her cold hand and his voice was gentle.

"Maw always wanted a daughter; a sister for our boy Johnny. When we taken June to raise, we had our hopes up; but it didn't work out, somehow. June's a good girl. Purty as a pitcher and educated, to boot. Could be that education weaned her away from us. We're common, homely folks, but she never warmed up to us. Never got into our hearts, like we'd hoped for.

"June Hayes makes a first rate schoolmarm. When we went to her graduation, seemed like she was sorta ashamed of us. Maw, in her best town dress. Me, in my store clothes. I reckon we did look like country rubes, all right." Jay Hayes chuckled. Linda was smiling faintly.

"You'll like Maw," Hayes went on, "and she'll mother you till you'll want to run off to git untied from her apron strings—"

"No!" Linda's voice choked. She tried to pull her hand away. "I can't go along! I'm bad! I'm not decent enough to set foot inside a home like that. Ask Johnny. Ask Stud Rutherford. Ask any man who ever stopped at Jake Kaneen's Horsethief Crossing. I'm what you said I was. A dirty, two-bit little—"

"You're as clean inside, child, as the day you was born. What Jake Kaneen taught you will come off your freckled young hide with a hot bath and strong yeller soap. You'll never belong to any man till the right 'un claims you. I'd like to hope it'll be that tow-headed boy of mine. But till he gits the hell whammed outta him, he ain't worth your bother.

"Or it might turn out to be Stud Rutherford. That big young feller's bin hurt too much. And because he got hurt bad, he reached fer a bottle of rotgut booze. And it stirs up the poison inside his heart. Some damn' fool woman turned Stud down because he's got Injun blood. She shoved a dull knife into his heart and twisted it and left it there and it's still there. Till she or some better woman pulls it out and heals the wound. You might do that for Stud. . . ."

Chapter IV

PLAN FOR BATTLE

THEY rode up to the big log barn. Linda Kaneen slid to the ground. The creek flowed past the barn and she went down on her hands and knees and began scrubbing her mouth with the water and wet sand. She looked like some pigtailed schoolgirl.

Johnny, shortening the stirrups on a saddled horse, looked at her, bewildered. Then at his father.

Jay Hayes grinned. "She's washin' off the bad taste of Horsethief Crossin', son. From here on, that girl is your kid sister. I want you to be proud of her."

The two Pothook cowpunchers rode up. Jay Hayes told them to stay at the line camp. That he'd send more men down to ride the river.

Linda had a scrubbed, scoured look when she, Johnny and Pothook Hayes rode on to the home ranch together. Pothook rode on ahead, and Johnny was left alone with Linda.

They covered several miles in silence. Now and then their glances would meet and slide away. It was Linda who spoke first.

"Jay Hayes," she said quietly, "is the finest man who ever lived."

"You'll like my mother, Linda."

"I never had a mother—not to remember. I'm scared, Johnny. And right now, with you, I'm so ashamed I'm sick inside. . . ."

Johnny took hold of her hand. It was cold. He grinned awkwardly and shook his yellow head.

"I'm just a boneheaded cowpuncher," he said, "but I've got brains enough to know you didn't mean anything that happened the other night."

"Jake Kaneen wasn't far off," Linda said slowly. "He told me what to do, what to say." She twisted sideways in her saddle. Yanking the blouse up from the waistband of the patched overalls, she showed him the scars across her back. Horsewhip scars. She tucked in the tail of her blouse.

"Jake Kaneen," she said bitterly, "has hated me from the night I was born. He worshipped my mother. When she died, giving birth to her first child, he hated that baby. He would have killed it. It was the Chinaman who saved my life. He lied; said the baby was born dead. He hid me and gave me to a wet nurse to raise. He kept me hidden till I was fifteen. . . . An orphanage—where my father found me and took me away, to raise me according to his lights.

"Jake Kaneen is my father, but I hate him! I've lain awake nights planning how to kill him. Locked in an old tin trunk is a picture of my mother. I've seen him holding that old picture with tears blinding him. I could have killed him then and he'd never have known. But I didn't. . . .

"Now your father is risking his life to give me a home. But I'm afraid, Johnny! Jake Kaneen is a killer. He's got renegades from Wyoming coming to Horsethief Crossing. They take their orders from Kaneen. Kaneen is after the Rocking R and Pothook outfits. He murdered Uncle Dan Taylor after he'd made him sign over Horsethief Crossing to me. It was horrible!"

Johnny put his arm around her shoulders, and they rode along like that. "My mother will be so darned glad to claim you, she'll just about smother you. And when she dips into her Saratoga trunk and digs up the old pictures and the wardrobe she used when she was a can-can dancer with a travelin' stage show, you'll know you're one of the family."

"Your mother was on the stage?"

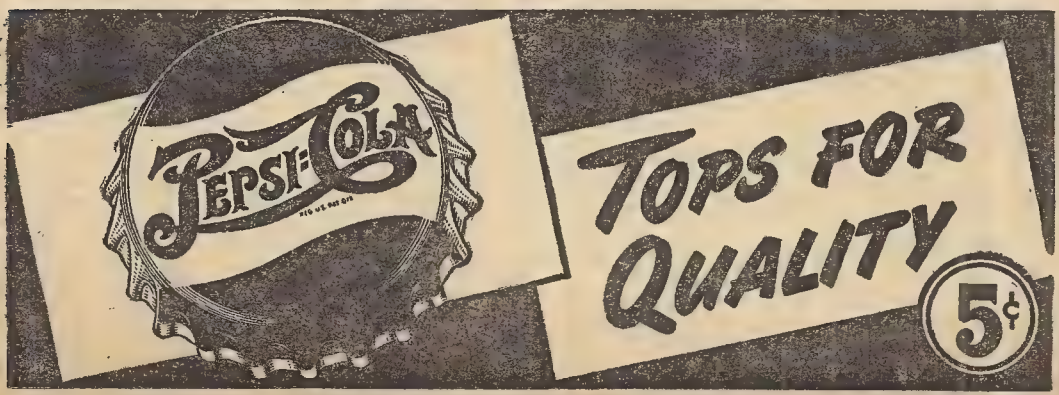
"She was seventeen when Jay Hayes jumped down outa the box where he was watchin' the show with some other cowmen, and yanked her outa the chorus and married her that same night. He was a little drunk. And plenty wild. Mom says he scared her into it, wavin' a six-shooter under the stage manager's long nose. But it's lasted thirty years. . . . You don't need to be scared of Mom."

"I'm not," Linda smiled. "Not now, Johnny."

BUT it was not until Mrs. Hayes, a bird-like woman with warm hazel eyes and reddish hair, met them at the ranchhouse, that Linda's fear melted. The woman took the girl in her arms with a glad cry, and they were both weeping. The loneliness and hunger for mother and daughter love in both their hearts had found fulfillment.

Jay Hayes and Johnny put up the three horses and came on to the house. They found Linda in the kitchen, helping with the supper. She looked clean and fresh and beautiful. Johnny stared in frank admiration. Jay Hayes watched his son.

"Wait," grinned Johnny Hayes, "till that stuck-up palomino cousin of mine gets a look at you. June Hayes will quit the country. We'll go to the Fourth of July dance at Landusky. And it'll serve that high-chinned June Hayes right for what she did to Stud Rutherford—"



"How's that again, son?" Jay Hayes asked.

"It was a couple-three years ago," Johnny said slowly, "at the Landusky dance, when the mines opened with a celebration on Miner's Day. June was makin' a play for the new mine superintendent. She'd bin playin' Stud along for a few months and Stud had come a hundred miles on horseback to take June to the dance. But she'd gone with this college dude that had come to ramrod Ruby Gulch Mine. Hugh Campbell. They stood there together, the schoolmarm in a new blue dress, Campbell in his tailored duds and low cut shoes. Talkin' college talk. . . .

"I was right behind Stud when he walked up to them, and I couldn't help overhear it. Stud wearin' the best clean shirt and new levis he'd taken out of his round-up warsack. His boots were tallered, and he's bin to the barbershop. Hair cut and shaved and the talcum powder the barber had put on his face looked blue against the rest of his hide. And he smelled of bay rum. With his black hair and eyes, Stud did look like an Injun, but up till then he'd bin proud of it. He was hurt because June hadn't waited for him to take her to the dance. But he wasn't showin' it. And he was cold sober.

"Cousin June looked at Stud. Looked him up and down. And wrinkled her nose like she smelled somethin' that stunk. She never even spoke to Stud. She turned around and put her arm through Hugh Campbell's.

" 'They shouldn't allow these drunken half-breeds to mingle with white people. . . .' And high-chinned June walked away, clingin' to her college man, leavin' big Stud Rutherford standin' there alone in the middle of the dance floor. Stud Rutherford got drunk that night for the first time in his life."

Johnny Hayes looked at Linda Kaneen.

"I want to see the look on June's face when you take Campbell away from her, then toss him back at her like you didn't want him. And then you dance *Home Sweet Home* with Stud Rutherford. . . ."

Jay Hayes stared at Johnny like he was badly disappointed. Linda looked at Johnny and their eyes met and some understanding was there and she nodded.

"I'd like to do that," she said, "for Stud." And she smiled at Jay Hayes.

Johnny reddened. Then grinned and winked. "It's Stud's sister Rea I'm thinkin' about. But she likes to be called Papoose. I'll show you the buckskin shirt she made me. . . ." He brought out a fringed buckskin shirt with beadwork on the pockets.

Linda made him put it on. She said she'd take the Injun out of Stud Rutherford; pull the dull knife out of his heart. But first she'd put him down on his big knees where he belonged. Johnny knew what she meant. It reminded them all that there was range war in the making. Linda told them what she knew about it.

Jake Kaneen gave the orders to renegades staked out along both sides of the river. They had killed the Pothook cowboy. There would be more killings unless Pothook and Rocking R buried their war hatchets and smoked the peace pipe. Kaneen was cashing in on the Rutherford-Hayes feud. Kaneen had been run out of Wyoming and had fetched a dozen, possibly more, rustlers with him and had them within easy call, day and night. They came and went during the night, there at Horsethief Crossing, riding stolen horses and packing saddle guns.

Kaneen had wolfish cunning enough to smell out the possibility of bad trouble between Rocking R and Pothook. He was fanning the smoldering coals into live flames. And once the blaze got big, nothing could stop it till it swept both the Rocking R and Pothook ranges like a prairie fire.

Jay Hayes and his son listened in silence. Now and then the grizzled cattleman would nod his head. Johnny was buckling on his cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter before Linda finished her story. And she held back nothing.

Kaneen had used his own daughter to stir up hatred between Stud and Johnny, but without too much success. He had used her in a like manner to rile up every Rocking R and Pothook cowpuncher who came to Horsethief Crossing. Kaneen fed them his rotgut booze. Then told Linda to flirt with them. Play one man against the other in a jealous whiskey-fired game. There were the horsewhip scars on her back to prove her story.

Jay Hayes took his saddle carbine from its rack. He and Johnny saddled fresh horses.

"We'll be back," Jay Hayes said, "when we git the job done. . . ." And they rode away into the night, headed for Horsethief Crossing.

Chapter V

SIXGUN REUNION

POTHOOK JAY HAYES and his son Johnny were a mile from Horsethief Crossing when they heard the noise of mounted men. They sighted two riders coming up the long ridge from the river bottom. And they heard Roarin' Bob Rutherford cussing down the pain in his bullet-ripped leg.

". . . And may the howlin' wolves never cease till I gut-shoot the polecat that fired the shot in the dark!"

Jay Hayes grinned flatly as he and Johnny rode in behind a heavy clump of buckbrush and waited for Rutherford and Stud to ride up. Then Pothook barked his challenge.

"Stand your hand, you big, bellerin' bull! Or we'll give you somethin' to cure that roarin' bellyache!"

"Bushwackin' Pothookers!" howled Rutherford. "Ride out into the open! You never seen the day ner the night when you could whup a sheepherder!"

"Puncture your guts and you'd drain a barrelful of Forty Rod likker. Mebbyso that's what Jake Kaneen had in mind when he taken that pot shot at you the other night. He was tappin' the Rutherford keg—"

"Jake Kaneen shot me?"

Jay Hayes and Johnny rode out from behind the buckbrush into the moonlit strip of wagon road. Not a gun was drawn, not a shot fired.

Roarin' Bob Rutherford and Pothook Jay Hayes rode toward one another and reined up only when their stirrups locked.

"By the eternal, Jay, you're lookin' ga'ant as somethin' that barely wintered!"

"Paw an' beller, Roarin' Bob, bloated as a poisoned pothound. . . ."

They sat their horses and cussed each other until they ran out of profanity.

Johnny rode over to where Stud sat his horse. Stud kept shoving his hands into all his pockets. Finally he pulled a crumpled envelope from the deep pocket of his chaps and smoothed it out and shoved it at Johnny.

"I bin packin' it I don't know how long. I hope for the day when you two will quit usin' me for a damned messenger boy. A travelin' one-man blind postoffice."

Johnny Hayes was riding a big black gelding with white spots the size of saucers across its sleek rump. He got down and began unsaddling.

"Pull your hull off that sorry Rockin' R geldin', Injun. I'm wore out watchin' the tears in your eyes and the droolin' look on your ugly face every time you see this spotted-rumped Pothook pony."

Stud Rutherford had his saddle off first. "Before you sober up and change your big hearted mind, young Pothook Johnny. But it's a hell of a note when a man swaps his kid sister for a spotted pony. It's an Injun deal. . . ." Stud Rutherford was making a terrific effort to make a josh of it.

Johnny Hayes eyed Stud as they swapped horses. He was getting the best horse in the Rocking R remuda, and he knew it. He fired his gut-shot. And watched its effect.

"Heard the latest, Stud? Cousin June Hayes and the college dude minin' engineer Hugh Campbell are going to get married. Mom read it in the Great Falls newspaper!"

He saw Rutherford stiffen as though he'd been slapped across the face with a quirt. Then the big quarter-breed son of Roarin' Bob Rutherford forced a stiff-lipped grin.

"I'll send 'em an Injun tepee," he said, "for a weddin' present."

He swung aboard the big gelding, eyeing Johnny Hayes warily. "You ain't opened Rea's note, Johnny."

"I was aimin' to wait till I got off to myself, but we got a night ahead of us, directly them two ol' rannyhans git done cussin' one another. I won't git a better time to ketch up on my readin'."

He struck a match and read the note. It was similar to a lot of others Rea Rutherford had sent Johnny by her brother. But he read hungrily, his face flushed, then folded it and buttoned it into his shirt pocket.

"We're gettin' married as quick as we kin locate a parson!" Johnny said quickly. "She said in the note she was goin' to Landusky. Then on to the Pothook ranch, to my mother. How long you bin packin' that note around, Injun?"

"About a week. Rea should be at your place by the time you git home. To-morrow or next day. What— I mean— I— Listen, Johnny, you'd be doin' me a big favor if you'd take your quirt and work me over good! And when you've wore the quirt out, mebbyso I kin ask you a question."

"You mean Linda? Mom's got her under her wing. Linda didn't send any note, Stud. But if I was to relay the message I read in her eyes, you're the top hand. But you'll have to git down on your knees, big Injun—and I'd give another good Pothook horse outa my string to see that!"

"I'd kneel to Linda Kaneen," said Stud Rutherford quietly, "with God and every human on earth a-watchin'. . . ."

"So I figured," said Johnny Hayes. "I hoped you'd see what I was too blind to notice till my dad pointed it out. He wasn't fooled for a second."

"Neither was Roarin' Bob," Stud Rutherford said. "He told me. It's the only time I kin remember when I thought my old man was goin' to give me a whuppin'. I mean a hell of a whuppin'! It sobered me up. Quick. I'll never take another drink of booze. It got your Cousin June outa my system. It was the dog-gondest thing ever happened to me.

"It wasn't anything I said—it was Jake Kaneen said it—Roarin' Bob hauled off and knocked Jake Kaneen down. Cold-wedged Kaneen. Then he told me to fork my horse and foller Linda Kaneen to wherever Pothook Jay Hayes had taken her, and to crawl on my belly, like the dirty yellow-bellied dog I was, and tell her she was the finest lady that ever lived."

ROARING BOB and Pothook had quit swearing. They were covertly watching their sons. Jay Hayes was not a drinking man;

he never packed a bottle. But he pulled one now from the pocket of his old fringed shotgun chaps. Pulled the cork and handed it to Bob Rutherford.

They drank. Then Jay Hayes corked the bottle and shoved it back into his chaps pocket.

"We'll tap it again, Bob," he said, "when the job's done."

"Come along, boys," Roarin' Bob said. "We'll show you young fellers how to git 'er done proper."

The four headed for Horsethief Crossing.

"Jake Kaneen," said Roarin' Bob as they rode along down the ridge, "has hollered for help. Me'n Stud left him there at his saloon. He'd sent word to his renegades back in the badlands that it was the big showdown. I told Kaneen I was comin' back to hang him. That the Rockin' R and Pothook was hangin' Jake Kaneen fer the murder of ol' Uncle Dan Taylor."

"He tried to kill you, sir," said Johnny Hayes.

"I knowed that, son," Bob Rutherford chuckled. "I seen the gunflame. It come from behind the bar where Kaneen was ducked down. But it wasn't wise, at the time, to tell all I knowed, so I whispered it to Stud and told him to play it close to his belly—till the time come to smoke Kaneen and his renegades out into the open.

"This is a gun trap we're goin' into, but there's Rockin' R and Pothook cowhands staked out back in the brush and they'll show their hands when the bets is all down. E'en so, it'll be a gun ruckus where anybody kin git bullet scratched, so take care of your tough hides, you two young fellers. Me'n Pothook Jay will take advantage of tonight to renew our youthful days.

"By the eternal, when we was your age, a-comin' up the cattle trail from Texas, Roarin' Bob and Pothook Jay was hellions. Warthawgs. We busted many a tinhorn's skull with a gun barrel, and many a fair maiden's heart. We painted every trail town red as the crimson dawn. We rode in and out every saloon in Dodge City, and the cowboy that didn't bed down at night with a perfumed sofa piller under his head was a disgrace to the cowboy profession.

"We let out our spurs to the town hole and left the spur marks on the dance floors of the honkeytonks. Whupped the badge-polishers and rode our reckless ways. Roarin' Bob an' his pardner Pothook Jay. . . . That's good likker you put out by the thimbleful, you ol' Pothook—"

"Till we drink to a little lady after the job is done," said Jay Hayes, "the cork stays in the bottle."

"By the eternal hell amighty, Jay, if I was forty years younger, I'd give you a contest!"

"If I was forty years younger, free an' twenty-one, I'd horn you off fer the big paw and beller you always was! Now simmer down on your roarin' or you'll holler us into a gun trap."

Chapter VI

DAWN ATTACK

THEY hit the river a mile above Horsethief Crossing. The moon had gone down behind the badlands and it was the dark hour before dawn that is supposed to be the blackest. Black enough, anyhow, to dim the shape of a man on horseback so that man and horse became no more than an uncertain dark blot that moved in the night.

They would loom up suddenly and a Pothook cowhand riding river guard would challenge them, gun hammer clicking.

"What's your iron?"

"Pothook!" Johnny Hayes would call back quietly.

"Earmarks?"

"Crop the right. Swallerfork the left!"

"Come ahead, Johnny."

"Had any trouble?"

"Couple a hard lookin' customers come acrost. We got 'em on ice. A Rockin' R cowhand says he come acrost to shake hands—"

"Then shake hands with the man," said Pothook Jay Hayes, "and keep the couple of renegades hogtied. Roarin' Bob and Stud and Johnny and me is goin' acrost to take Horsethief Crossin' away from Jake Kaneen."

"The Rockin' R cowhand said you'n Roarin' Bob done buried the tommyhawk and was fixin' to hang Jake Kaneen to a cottonwood branch."

"That's the size of it," Roarin' Bob rumbled.

"Then we'll give your boy back his guns. Good huntin'. Deal us in on the necktie party."

"If you hear me shoot three times for a signal," said Johnny Hayes, "come a-shootin'. I doubt if we take Kaneen alive."

Johnny Hayes and Stud Rutherford picked the crossing. They had been swimming the big Missouri since they were kids. Nobody but an expert river man or a drunken damn fool would tackle the Missouri above Horsethief Crossing, even though it would be unguarded. The current would land them above the long sandbar of the south side.

Pothook and Roaring Bob agreed with reluctance. Neither could swim a lick. And when Bob Rutherford's horse came over backward, out in the middle of the swift black channel, it was Johnny who saved him from drowning. He grabbed the big cowman and shoved his horse's tail into Roarin' Bob's hands and told him to coast across on his belly.

Then Johnny went across with Bob Rutherford's horse that did a good job of swimming once the gelding found out Johnny savvied handling a horse in bad water. And they waded ashore in the darkness, dripping and sodden, but so far as they could tell, without being seen.

They got water out of their boots and Roarin' Bob took a drink from his bottle of Horsethief Crossing rotgut. He said it was a hell of a note being under obligation for his life to a young whippersnapper like Johnny, that called him Roarin' Bob behind his back and Mistered him to his face.

They tightened their saddle cinches and Stud led the way along a river trail that twisted through the heavy red willows and undergrowth of vines. The first streak of dawn was in the sky when they reached the log buildings and pole corrals and the ferryboat bulked dark against the bank. They dismounted and left their horses in behind the brush and crouched there with their saddle carbines.

The saloon lamp was burning. Kaneen and his renegades were inside, making a lot of drunken noise. Stud went off to contact Rocking R cowhands staked out around the place. He was back in a little while, a grim look on his face.

"There's a lot of 'em," Stud said. "Fightin' drunk. Kaneen's the drunkest. They got the Chinaman that's bin Linda's only friend on earth since she was born. They bin yankin' him around by his pigtail. Now they're fixin' to hang the pore Chink. There they come—"

"Set back!" Pothook Jay Hayes said flatly. "Take 'er easy."

The saloon door burst open. Burly Jake Kaneen lurched out, leading the little old Chinaman by his long-braided pigtail. Fifteen or twenty heavily-armed men crowded out through the lighted doorway. The ridge log of the saloon stuck out about ten feet from the sod roof. They had a rope noosed around the Chinaman's neck. Now they threw the loose end of the rope up over the protruding ridge-log. They milled around the little man, filling the gray dawn with profanity.

Stud Rutherford slipped back into the brush. "Give me all the time you can," he said. "I'm settin' fire to the place."

"Wait for me, Injun," Johnny grinned.

Roarin' Bob Rutherford and Pothook Jay Hayes crouched there, waiting, sweating it out. They saw Stud and Johnny come out of the brush and across the short clearing and vanish in the saloon's rear. It was gray daylight now. Jake Kaneen's whiskey voice sounded ugly.

"Back up, you curly wolves! Gimme more room! I bin waitin' too many years to string up this damned sneakin' double-crossin' Chink! Lemme have that rope!"

All of Kaneen's two hundred and fifty pounds was on the end of the rope. He had it half hitched around his belly and was slowly backing off, tightening the slack. The taut rope was pulling the Chinaman into the air. The noose with its hangman's knot tightening. No sight of smoke or blaze as yet at the back of the saloon. Bob Rutherford and Jay Hayes had their carbine sights lined in the gray light. They swapped a quick glance.

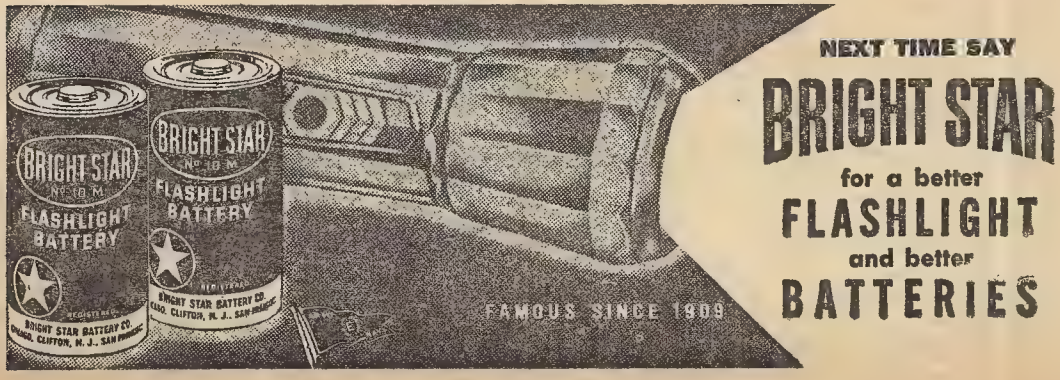
"Can't put this off no longer, Bob."

"We'll save Kaneen till the last. . . ."

"That's it."

Their saddle carbines cracked at almost the same split second. It was good shooting at fifty yards in the gray light. The two .30-30 bullets cut the rope in two places.

THE broken rope flipped up over the ridge-log. Big Jake Kaneen, all his weight reared back on his bootheels, went over backward. Before he hit the ground Bob Rutherford and Jay Hayes were firing into the tight circle of men as fast as they could lever cartridges into their guns and pull the trigger. And for a few seconds the renegades were stunned. Then they were milling, shouting, shooting wildly. Jake Kaneen, his wind knocked out, rolled over and scrambled wildly to his feet, gasping,



then suddenly finding his whiskey voice.

But it was drowned out in the gunfire and Roarin' Bob Rutherford's bellowing war challenge. "Stand and fight, you coyote sons! Have at 'em, you Rockin' R cowhands. Pour it to 'em!"

Jake Kaneen charged in through the door of his saloon. Others crowded close behind him. Then from inside the old log cabin saloon sounded Jake Kaneen's harsh wail of fury, fear threading it like a hot wire. There was the crashing of broken windows. And out of the smashed windows billowed black smoke and flames that licked the dry wood sills and the old logs. Those inside fought to get out; the doorway was choked with the renegades trying to force their way in—out of the line of fire of the rifles.

Big Stud Rutherford and Johnny Hayes had found a five gallon can of kerosene and had saturated the bar and the chairs and card tables they piled against the walls near the back door. Then they set it afire and when the blaze roared into such billowing fury it could never be put out by human hands they shut the back door on the burning saloon. And now they crouched and ran for the shelter of the brush behind the saloon.

They were half way across and Johnny, faster than big Stud, was in the lead, running zig-zag, and the bullets whining like hornets. Johnny heard Stud grunt like he'd been kicked in the belly. He cut a swift glance across his shoulder. Saw big Stud stagger a few steps and go down.

Johnny had reached the safety of the brush and thrown himself flat, spooking half a dozen saddled horses standing, bridle reins dropped, in behind the brush. He saw Stud Rutherford sprawled on the ground. Bullets were kicking dirt all around him. Johnny grabbed the trailing bridle reins of the nearest horse and flung himself into the saddle. He whirled and spurred.

It was a fool thing to do, but the only thing. He slid the horse to a halt that sat the gelding back on its haunches so hard it burned the hair off. Stud was up on his feet, blood all over the front of his shirt. A twisted grin bared his teeth as Johnny leaned from his saddle and grabbed him, and Stud was on behind him and it was a race against the leaden hail of death. And the game horse packed his double burden into the brush. Then the big horse, spooked by the gunfire, the spurring and yanking around, got his head and broke in two, pitching, squealing, bucking, piling Johnny Hayes and Stud Rutherford into a tangled heap behind the brush.

"Must be one of your Rockin' R spoiled broncs. At the Pothook, we break 'em right. Take it easy, big Injun!"

"I dropped my saddle gun!"

"You always was awkward. . . . Take mine."

Johnny was using it, squinting along the sights as he crouched on one knee, pulling the trigger.

Stud rolled over on his belly. He tried to stand, but one leg gave way. He'd been shot above the knee. Blood from a shoulder wound was staining his shirt. He jerked out his six-shooter and pawed a hole in the buckbrush and lay flat on his belly and commenced firing.

The din of gunfire was terrific now. Above it sounded the war whoop of Roarin' Bob Rutherford.

"Take it to 'em, you Rockin' R stock-hands! Earn that extry dollar a month you git for fightin' wages! How you makin' out, Pothook Jay?"

"Toler'ble." Jay Hayes' voice, flat-toned, was blotted out.

Then the shooting died down. Here and there a gun cracked. But the battle was about over and most of the shooting came from the Rocking R guns that were mopping up. Bob Rutherford and Jay Hayes had given their men orders to take no prisoners. This was outside the law. They had no way of handling a prisoner.

There was no sign of Jake Kaneen. He had not come out of his blazing saloon.

"Mebbyso," roared Bob Rutherford, "Jake Kaneen likes it in there. Gittin' used to the Hell's heat that's a-waitin' fer him!"

Then Kaneen was standing in the doorway of his Horsethief Crossing saloon. The fire had singed his graying red hair and whiskers, and his pants and shirt were smoldering, and his skin was black, and out of that burnt black mask his eyes, blood-shot, were slivers of green glass. He had no gun in his hand. No bottle. Both huge hands, burned till the skin was raw and black, clutched a flat package wrapped in dirt-glazed buckskin. Kaneen stood there in the doorway, the billowing smoke and flames licking at his back. Then he staggered out into the dawn.

"Hold your fire, men!" Bob Rutherford called.

The Chinaman had pulled the noose from around his neck and staggered to his feet, his parchment face a mask of hate. From under his loose black Chinese blouse he had pulled a short-barreled .45 belly gun. Its sawed-off barrel pointed at Kaneen. The hammer came back.

"Give . . . to . . . the kid. . . ." Jake Kaneen's whiskey voice croaked. He shoved the flat buckskin wrapped package toward the Chinaman.

The sawed-off .45 spewed a short streak of flame. The heavy slug tore through Kaneen's open mouth that was an ugly red hole in a burnt black mask. The heavy slug tore out the

back of the singed skull. Death glazed the green eyes. Jake Keenan was dead when he went down in a shapeless burnt heap.

THE Chinaman took the flat buckskin-wrapped package and tucked it inside his black blouse. The rope mark was an ugly red welt that ringed his skinny neck. His red-brown eyes were bright and wicked. He shoved the belly gun out of sight.

"Chips all down," the Chinaman grinned at Roarin' Bob Rutherford and Jay Hayes. "Missy Linda all light? Me go see. Got package. Pitchah. Lilly Linda's mamma pitchah. Her all light?"

"She's all right, Chink," said Jay Hayes. "And we'll take you to her. Directly."

It was the Chinaman, with his ancient knowledge of healing herbs and skillful surgery, who patched the bullet holes in big Stud Rutherford and saved him from bleeding to death, and set a bullet shattered leg so that Stud would one day walk again with no more than a slight limp.

It was Linda Kaneen who came to Stud Rutherford. Because Stud could not be moved for a week or two. And somehow, when the time came for it, they needed no words at all to tell one another all that was in their hearts. They had both been too badly hurt to have need of words.

Little Rea Rutherford had straight, coarse blue-black hair. Her eyes were warm and brown and shy as a fawn's. Slim as a boy, timid in front of strangers. But she had a will of her own.

"We'll put off our wedding, Johnny, till Stud gets on his feet."

Johnny liked to tease her. He pretended an impatience that was only half feigned at that.

"Why should we wait for that big awkward Injun. Heck, he'll fall down at his own weddin'."

"And you'll be there to pick me up, you tow-headed Pothook rep. I shore dread goin' through the rest of my days owin' my life to my brother-in-law."

Roarin' Bob Rutherford said something along the same lines. He said life would lose its salty flavor, now that he couldn't roar about wintering Pothook cattle.

It was a double wedding. The wedding cake that Mom Hayes made was the biggest wedding cake ever built. The Chinaman laid the frosting on an inch thick.

When Hugh Campbell claimed his second waltz with Linda at the wedding dance, Johnny almost shouted. Then he saw June Hayes Campbell, blonde and beautiful as Snow White, walk over to where big Stud Rutherford was standing.

"This isn't Leap Year, Stud, but if you'll dance with me, I'll feel better."

Big Stud let a slow grin spread across his dark face. The dull knife had left no scar.

"It'll be a pleasure, June." He limped a little when he waltzed her past where Johnny had his arm around his bride. He winked over June's shoulder.

"An Injun winks," Johnny chuckled. "I reckon I've seen everything, now. Let's waltz, Papoose. Wait! Hold on!"

Johnny left Rea standing there. He was back in a minute. He had shed his new white shirt and black wedding tie. And he was wearing a beaded buckskin shirt.

"I'm a member of the Rutherford tribe," he sang to the tune of the waltz.

Roarin' Bob Rutherford followed Pothook Jay Hayes outside. Jay Hayes dug up a bottle of whiskey. Two drinks had gone from it. He pulled the cork and threw it away.

"The job's done, Bob. We're drinkin' to the little lady. To Linda!"

They drank then to Rea. And they were drinking to Mom Hayes when she caught them.

"And if you'll allow me a small sip," she told them, "I'd like to toast a pair of old rannyhans that know a lady when they see one!"

THE END

LO, THE POOR BUFFALO!

AN EIGHTY-SIX-YEAR-OLD freighter over the old Santa Fe Trail, who was a friend of mine when I was quite young, told me the following story and swore it was true. So many buffalo roamed the Western plains that the freighters had to lay over for whole days at a time until the herds passed. Also, that trains would have to wait for some time for herds to cross the tracks.

And at Fort Riley, Kansas, the commanding officer issued an order which read: "Members of this command, when shooting at buffalo on the parade ground, are to be careful and not fire in the direction of Company Quarters. Officers will discontinue the roping and riding of buffalo. The next trooper who kills a buffalo in one mile of the Company's Quarters will either bury or remove the carcass to a safe distance after being released from his daily duties."

—DAVE SANDS.

LITTLE BILL FILLS HIS FIST

By MARVIN J. JONES

LITTLE BILL wriggled deep into the feather tick of his high-poster bed, put his head under the quilts, his fingers in his ears, and waited, quivering in anticipation. He was still breathing like a winded bronc from his wild dash upstairs.

Nothing happened. His toes began to ache from being doubled up so tightly. At last he cautiously took a finger from one ear, then from the other. Still, nothing happened. Little Bill threw back the covers and sat bolt upright in the bed.

"Drat the luck!" he exploded.

At that instant, the first ray of the sun poked a long finger through the open window and across the bed. As if this was a signal, there came an explosion, a deathly silence and then a bedlam of sound. Little Bill grinned, jumped from the bed and ran to the window.

A hundred yards from the house, an eddy of smoke still drifted from the corner of the bunkhouse. The sun gleamed on freshly splintered wood. The door burst open suddenly and cowboys began to tumble out in various stages of undress.

Old Charley came first, sputtering and yowling like a wildcat. Windy Dalton was right behind him, in a pair of sawed-off red flannels, a six-shooter in his hand. Injun Jim bounded out, dressed in a Winchester—and nothing else.

From below Little Bill came a shriek of outraged modesty. That would be the widder woman at the kitchen window, guessed Little Bill. Injun Jack heard the scream, too, and immediately guessed the cause. He swerved frantically and tried to dart back into the bunkhouse. His momentum carried the men coming out back from the door, but the recoil bounced him outside again and his nudeness was concealed only by a tangle of struggling bodies. Bull Rannigan leaped the pile, a six-gun in each hand.

"It's the Circle R outfit!" he bellowed. "We're surrounded!"

The .45's began to roar and the Double B waddies dug their noses into the ground and waited for Bull to run out of ammunition. With the tenth and last shot, a window in the ranchhouse went out with a crash.

It was Big Bill's bedroom window and in two shakes Big Bill's red face appeared, framed in jagged splinters of glass.

"Git back in that bunkhouse, you locoed bunch of steers!" he bellowed and the six-shooter in his hand barked out an exclamation point.

When he dealt himself a hi-yu Fourth of July jamboree, by prodding his best friends into a fist-sledging, black-eye showdown, Little Bill didn't know that a deadly tinhorn was sitting in the game—shoulder-rigged with two Annie Oakleys to the graveyard!

There was a flurry of dust in front of the bunkhouse, a tangle of bodies fighting their way inside and then the door slammed shut. The muffled sounds of cursing reached Little Bill. From next door came Big Bill's profane comments as he tossed broken glass from his bedroom window. Below, the widder woman banged pots and pans around to keep from hearing what was being said. Little Bill sank weakly to the floor and rolled in helpless laughter.

"Biggest bunch of foolishness I ever seen," Big Bill was saying when Little Bill slipped downstairs and took his place at the table. "Grown men actin' up thataway!"

There was a strained silence when Little Bill sat down. He pretended to be unaware of the glowering eyes and, coughing delicately, asked for the syrup. Old Charley handed it down, his eyes gleaming a threat.

"It's a wonder we wern't all kilt in our beds," he grumbled.

But Big Bill only snorted and Little Bill stuffed his mouth full of flapjacks so's he wouldn't bust out laughing again. Last Fourth of July it had been the other way around. Little Bill had been blasted awake by a home-made firecracker that had been tossed through his window by parties unknown.

Except for Old Charley's mumbling, there wasn't much said. Injun Jim and the widow were the most silent of all. The gaunt lady spoke to nobody and went about her breakfast chores in a rustle of outraged gingham, every grey hair in her head bristling indignation. Injun Jim kept his nose on his flapjacks until

they disappeared. He was the first one through with the chuck, and bolted from the table, grunting something about getting his gear ready for the rodeo.

With that, some of the tension passed away and talk about the rodeo and fair began.

"I reckon makin' a good showin' today ain't gonna hurt your chances none with that new schoolmarm, eh, Jack?" Windy Dayton asked slyly.

There were chuckles and Jack Lowell's face flushed with embarrassment. He pretended to choke to cover his confusion, but Windy wasn't fooled.

"Yep," Windy continued wisely, "if you're top man today, Jack, I reckon Ed Winters might just as well pack his warbag and sneak away. Course, if it's the other way around . . ." He paused and let laughter fill in the rest.

"Don't you worry about it none, Jack," Bull Rannigan cut in reassuringly. "If the best man wins, we're gonna feel just as bad about it as you do. Damned if we won it!"

Even Old Charley grinned at this, but Little Bill pushed aside his plate, mumbled an explanation to Big Bill and slipped away from the table. The flapjacks had suddenly stuck in his throat. Outside, he drew in a great lungful of the early morning air, but it didn't take away the queeziness from his stomach or lift the lead from his heart. Through Little Bill's mind floated the clear, fragrant, soul-searing vision of Nancy Seldon.

IT WAS still on his mind when he set out for town. He had waited until Bull, Windy and the rest had gone. Big Bill and Charley were coming in later with the wagon. Little Bill didn't want to wait for them, and prudence had kept him from riding in with the rest. There would have been too much opportunity for them to extract revenge for the morning's disturbance. Besides, Little Bill wanted to be alone with his thoughts.

"You'd think," he told his pony moodily, "that a nice girl like that, just comin' from

Little Bill's knees felt like the bone was melting right out of them.

the East and all, would be some particular 'bout takin' up with a couple of critters like Jack Lowell and Ed Winters."

And the more Little Bill thought along this line, the more of a pity it seemed to be. He rode along in a haze of sadness at the thought of Nancy's innocence and the blackguard qualities of his two rivals.

That he could not point an accusing finger at any undesirable trait in either puncher bothered Little Bill not in the least. He didn't really know Jack very well, him only being with the Double B about a year, and given a little more time, Jack would no doubt show some of these traits. And he knew Ed Winters even less well, Ed being a Circle R hand.

"And one of them's bound to show up better'n the other at the rodeo," Little Bill thought sorrowfully. So in an aura of self-pity, Little Bill arrived at the fair grounds.

He was running a gloomy and speculative eye over the corralled buckers, with the silent hope that therein lay the means for at least two broken necks, when he was startled by a shrill, delighted cry.

"Billy Sands!"

"Drat that Clara Wilson!" Little Bill muttered ungallantly and ducked around a handy Conestoga wagon, only to run full tilt into the massive bosom of Mrs. Wilson.

Mrs. Wilson made a glad noise and clutched him in a smothering embrace that left only his red ears as evidence of his embarrassment. He was released only to find one of his arms firmly possessed by the freckle-faced, snub-nosed Clara.

"Why, Billy! We ain't seen you since school let out!" Mrs. Wilson gushed, misty eyed with emotion.

"We been right busy, ma'am," Little Bill mumbled, trying not to feel the warm nearness of Clara pressed against his arm.

"Well!" Mrs. Wilson scolded. "We'll see about that. What does Bill think he's about, working a boy like you as if you was a full grown man. I declare, that man don't have no more idea about raising a boy than. . . ."

Little Bill allowed himself to be wrangled away by Clara, as a choice between two evils. As they made the round of the fair grounds, Little Bill's contribution to the flow of conversation was mostly "yes" and "no." He made an earnest effort to dodge any and all Double B waddies and thus escape their merciless hoo-rawing later on.

"There's nothing sillier'n a twelve-year-old kid," Little Bill thought unhappily, as Clara cooed over the calves. "Doggone it!" he said aloud.

"What's the matter, Billy?" Clara asked anxiously.

"Oh, Big Bill just gave me a wave to hustle over," Little Bill explained, freeing his arm.

"I don't see him," Clara complained, standing on tiptoe.

"He just disappeared behind a wagon," Little Bill assured her and, breaking into a lope, he did the same. He had caught sight of Nancy Seldon, and in his hurry he did not see the wistful sadness that settled over Clara Wilson's face as he deserted her.

"Why, hello, Bill!" Nancy Seldon greeted him as he came running up.

"Hello," said Little Bill, and then the shock of her blue eyes, the dimples, perfume and the fluffy whiteness of her dress swept over him, leaving him dizzy, tongue tied and trembling. She gave his arm a quick, intimate squeeze that made him reel with pleasure.

"Have you seen the calves yet?" he asked her hopefully, as he brought his eyes back to semi-focus.

At that instant, the God of luck smote Little Bill on the shoulder and smiled upon him. There was a swift exchange of angry words in a group of men near them. Then came the sharp spat of a blow and a man staggered backward and sat heavily on his levis at their feet.

Nancy Seldon gave a little scream of surprise and her face paled as she stared, wide-eyed, at the trickle of blood that ran down the fallen cowboy's chin. She picked up her skirts with one hand, seized Little Bill's arm with the other and he gallantly hurried her a safe distance away.

They halted and the girl leaned against a buckboard. The smile came back to her lips and the color to her cheeks, but there was still a shocked look in her eyes.

"How horrid!" she exclaimed, fanning herself with a tiny lace handkerchief. "Why can't men ever learn to control their tempers?"

Inspiration struck Little Bill a dazzling blow. *He* had not seen who struck the blow, so the girl could not have seen either.

"Oh, he ain't that way, less he's been drinkin'," he assured her casually.

"Who isn't?" Nancy asked curiously.

"Jack Lowell?" answered Little Bill.

"Jack Lowell!" the girl exclaimed in shocked surprise.

"Yes'm," Little Bill lied brazenly. "Jack's a little mean when he's likkered up." He paused, as if in thought, and then added, "Yep, I guess there ain't a meaner ranny in the country when he's riled, less'n it's Ed Winters."

"Ed Winters!" Nancy echoed hollowly, again seeking the support of the buckboard and losing her color once more.

"Yes'm," Little Bill rattled on. "But there aint' no better hands a goin'." He hesitated again, delicately. "When they're sober, that is."

Miss Seldon was obviously faint. Little Bill guided her back to the womenfolk, seated her on a bench, brought her a cup of water and then excused himself. The fact that he had shattered two reputations and ruined Nancy Seldon's day brought only a glow of elation to Little Bill's breast. He felt himself to be in the role of gallant protector to Nancy Seldon's purity. The characteristics he had assigned to the two lovelorn cowboys were true enough, Little Bill felt, if they really let down the bars and appeared in their true light. The only problem left, now, was to see that the two did appear in their true light.

AN HOUR later, Little Bill was down hanging around the bronc pen when Jack Lowell was going over his saddle, polishing the silver and checking the stirrups. Pretty soon Jack let out a yelp of anger, so Little Bill wandered over to see if he could be of any help.

Jack was looking wrathfully at the cinch. Someone had carefully cut it on the inside where it would be hardest to see. When the puncher saw Little Bill, he drew him angrily to one side.

"Did you see anybody foolin' around with my saddle?" he demanded, sort of grinding his teeth.

Little Bill looked surprised and shook his head. "Why, no, Jack. Nobody at all. I been here all the time and there ain't been nobody around at all. 'Ceptin' Ed Winters, of course."

"Ed Winters, hey!"

"Yep. He just stopped by to say hello, though, and admired your saddle. He said it was as purty a saddle as he'd ever seen. But nobody else has been here that I seen. Course that Eastern girl, Miss Nancy, was with him."

"Oh, she was!" Jack said, looking a little startled. Then he sort of eased Little Bill farther away from the people standing around.

"I 'spect she was plumb enjoyin' the fair?" Jack asked, acting like he really wasn't interested.

Little Bill frowned. "Well, I dunno," he answered reluctantly. "Them Eastern girls are kind of funny."

"Yeah?" the young puncher coaxed him along.

"I guess it ain't much like she thought it would be—the West, I mean," Little Bill said carelessly.

"How do you figure that?" Jack asked, plumb forgetting not to act interested.

Little Bill tipped his hat forward and scratched the back of his head. "Well, just from what he was tellin' Ed—like when they got to talkin' about you, for instance."

"Yeah?" Jack asked, his eyes getting big with surprise. "They was talkin' about me, huh?"

"Well, she just sort of mentioned you," Little Bill amended. "She just said that you were her idea of a he-man and that you looked the way she'd thought all cowboys would look—big and strong lookin' and—and —" Little Bill frowned in apparent effort to recall a word.

Jack Lowell looked around guiltily and then leaned close to Little Bill. "G-good looking?" he asked hastily.

"No-o-o," Little Bill said, screwing up his face in thought. "Dangerous!" he stated finally. "That was the word."

"Dangerous!" Jack exclaimed, his eyes popping with amazement.

"That's what she said," Little Bill maintained firmly. He scratched his head again, delicately.

The young puncher's height grew by inches. "And what did Ed Winters have to say to that?" he asked triumphantly.

"Oh, he just laughed," Little Bill assured him innocently.

The puncher's jaw dropped and then his teeth came together with a click. "He did, huh!" he gritted and then went stomping off to try to find another cinch.

"He does look kinda mean, at that," Little Bill mused thoughtfully, watching the angry

cowboy take off. Bill pushed his hat to the back of his head and went swaggering away in search of Ed Winters.

His interview with Ed was such a smashing success that when Clara Wilson once more cornered him and invited him over for noon chuck, he magnanimously accepted. He ate himself around half a fried chicken and was industriously concerned with the other half when Old Charley came hobbling up at a run.

"You seen Big Bill?" the old foreman demanded.

Little Bill had his mouth so full of chicken that he could only shake his head. Charley didn't say another word, just went loping off. Little Bill was so surprised that he forgot to chew.

"What's the matter?" Clara demanded.

"He didn't even look at the chicken," Little Bill said, in awed tones.

And the more he thought about it, the more puzzled he became. Something pretty bad must have happened to make Old Charley excited enough to pass up a piece of fried chicken—and at a run, at that. Little Bill delved back into his memory to try and think of the times he had actually run. This morning, after the explosion, was the only time. Maybe somebody is gunnin' for him, Little Bill reasoned. So he crammed his mouth and hands full of chicken and took out after the foreman.

But he couldn't find him. He did, finally, run into Big Bill and Windy. Both of them looked fit to be tied and paid no attention to Little Bill.

"Well," Windy was saying, "neither one of them can hit the broad side of a barn with a .45." He didn't seem to be as much worried as Big Bill, but when Little Bill heard that, a funny little chill went up his spine. He knew right off who they were talking about.

"I've seen those kind of gunfights before," Big Bill said, frowning. "They get so close that neither one can miss and both parties get perforated."

LITTLE BILL gulped and the leg of fried chicken slipped out of his hand, but he had kinda lost his appetite anyway. This was a little more than he had figured on. A black eye apiece would have been plenty to convince Miss Nancy that she was interested in the wrong kind of cowboys. But a killing!

"Well," Big Bill said, when Windy had no comment to make about that, "I done all I could. I talked to both of them like a Dutch uncle. I can't figger out how they got so all-fired mad at each other. Neither one of 'em would say anything, except hint maybe I should mind my own business."

"It must be over this Eastern girl," Windy argued.

"That's what I figgered," Big Bill admitted. "Soon's Charley told me, and I seen there wasn't nothin' I could do, I sent him to find her and see if maybe she couldn't patch things up between 'em."

Just then, Old Charley came limping up. He wasn't loping this time and he looked plumb disgusted.

"Well?" Big Bill demanded.

"She skedaddled!" Old Charley said bitterly.

"Skedaddled!"

"That's what I said," the foreman said sourly. "Soon's I tolt her about it, she gives a scream and falls on her face. The wimmenfolk rush up and give me a terrible jawin' over and then she rears up and allows she'd better go home, she's feelin' ill."

Charley spat hugely to show his state of feeling.

"When is this joint suicide comin' off?" Windy wanted to know.

"Right after the bulldoggin'," Big Bill told him. "They've agreed to meet over in the grove before it gets too dark to shoot."

"It's sure a shame," Windy said sorrowfully. "Two nice boys like that, gettin' all het up over nothin'."

Little Bill was plumb horrified. There wasn't any time to sit down and worry about what he had done. He took to his heels right off and went looking for Jack Lowell. Probably, Little Bill decided, Jack would be afraid to wallop him, because of Big Bill. Right offhand, he couldn't think of anything that was going to save him a hiding by Big Bill, but maybe Mrs. Wilson could bully Big Bill into taking it a mite easy. Anyway, that would come later.

He found Jack easy enough and got right down to brass tacks.

"Jack," he blurted out, "you recollect I was tellin' you about Miss Nancy and Ed Winters? Well, I was just plain hoorawin' you. They ain't even seen each other today. It was me that done the carvin' on your cinch, knowin' you'd find it fore you went ridin' and—"

Jack Lowell stopped him right there, dropping a hand on his shoulder and talking real fatherly like.

"Listen, Bill," he said gently. "You're a swell kid to be tryin' to take the blame for that worthless, cowardly Ed Winters, but it ain't gonna do no good. I'm gonna pour so much lead into that windbag that he'll sink right up to his ears. Then I'm gonna blow the top of his head right off. Now you run back and tell Big Bill that I ain't got no argument with him, but I don't take kindly to him sendin' kids over to smooth-talk me."

"But—" Little Bill tried to get off some more talk.

"Git!" Jack said coldly. He turned Little Bill around and kicked him not so gently on the seat of his levis. "My patience is plumb runnin' out. You tell the rest of the bunch if any more of 'em comes around that I'm gonna do me a little practisin' for the main event."

Little Bill's momentum carried him about fifty feet, then he sat down on a wagon-tongue, not knowing whether to cuss or cry. Trouble, Little Bill decided, was a lot like an avalanche. It was right easy to start, but hell and high water couldn't stop it. And probably Ed Winters would figure just the way Jack had done.

Being a little tender from the latter's boot, Little Bill had no desire to interview Ed about the coming battle. He scooched around on the wagon-tongue, trying to sit more comfortable, and then explored the hip pocket of his levis to see what in tarnation was digging into him. He found out what it was and as he was fingering them, his eyes glazed over with a sudden thought. Then he gave a yell and started hell-bent to find Old Charley.

THE foreman was kind of grumpy when Little Bill dragged him out of the crowd, but when Little Bill started talking Charley's jaw dropped like the hinge was busted. And when Little Bill got to the part about carving up the saddle cinches, the foreman swallowed his chaw.

"But I got an idea," Little Bill added hastily, when Old Charley reached out and grabbed him.

"*You* got an idea," the foreman stormed. "*I* got an idea! I got an idea Big Bill is gonna peel the hide off'n you in strips. And I'm gonna help him," he added ominously.

"Wait!" Little Bill pleaded as he was being dragged off.

Old Charley waited, but he kept a good grip on Little Bill's arm just in case. He almost lost his jaw again when the idea was explained to him. Then he let out a whoop like a wild Indian, slapped his leg and laughed till the tears came. He sobered up right away, though, and grabbed Little Bill by the shoulder.

"It might just work," he said, his eyes crinkled with worry, "seein' as how they been such good friends right up to now. And if it don't work," Old Charley said morosely, "they'll probably hang me right along with you." He whirled Little Bill around and started him on the way with a boot in the pants. "And don't you let Ed Winters out of your sight," he warned him.

If Little Bill hadn't been so worried, he would have stopped and told Old Charley where to get off. This being kicked in the pants was getting to be too much of a habit.

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But when he turned around and saw the gleam in the foreman's eyes, Little Bill decided he'd better forget it, at least for the moment.

"And I'm not forgettin' this mornin'," Old Charley yelled after him. "Not by a damned sight!"

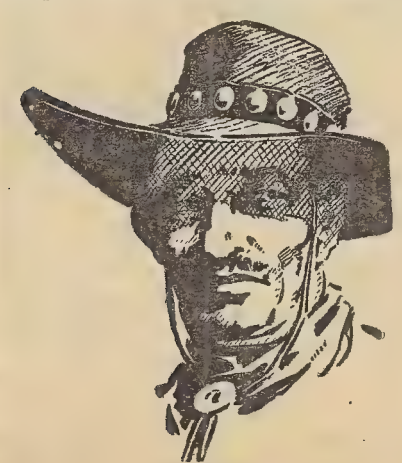
Ed Winters was busy getting ready to enter the bulldogging contest. He was taking off his new boots and putting on a pair of old ones and frowning fit to kill. Then he took off his gun-belt and hung it on a wagon. He swaggered off, nodding at Little Bill, but not paying him any real attention. Which was a relief to Little Bill.

Ed, his shirt torn, came back in a little while, kind of dusty, and looking pretty mad. The bulldogging hadn't gone so well, Little Bill guessed. Ed got another shirt, changed his boots back and buckled on his gun-belt. Before he started off, he drew out the .45 and looked it over good, spinning the cylinder to see that it was loaded and everything worked all right. Then he set it in the holster, easy-like, so it wouldn't be sticking when he made a grab for it.

Little Bill followed him over to the grove, his heart in his throat and something mighty empty in his stomach. He even prayed a little, he was so plumb anxious that everything come off all right.

Jack Lowell wasn't there yet, but the Circle R waddies and Double B hands were hunkered around in the grove, to see that everything was on the square. There was a lot of muttering going on and it was easy to see that it wouldn't take much to start the whole bunch to shooting.

Big Bill was over talking to the Circle R boss, real friendly like, as if he wanted to set a good example so that there wouldn't be any bad blood between the two outfits after the shooting. But Big Bill looked so grim that



Ed Winters

Jack Lowell

Little Bill guessed Old Charley hadn't talked to him yet.

Then Jack Lowell came walking into the grove from the far side, coming slow, but not hesitating. As soon as Ed Winters saw him, he started toward him at the same slow walk. When they came within speaking distance, they both slowed down even more.

"You can start fillin' your fist any time," Jack called, in a low, strained voice. Which was kind of foolish, because neither one of them had an edge on the other.

Ed Winters didn't answer at all. His hand was brushing his holster and he kept right on walking. It was just like Big Bill had said it would be. Both of them were going to close in to where neither could miss. The waddies from both spreads fanned out some, knowing that a stray bullet kills just about as good as any other kind.

Little Bill kept swallowing, but whatever was in his throat kept bobbing right back up again. His knees felt like the bone was melting right out of them and his eyes didn't focus none too good.

For a minute it looked like they were going to walk right up to each other, stick their guns down each other's throats and start blasting away. But when they were about ten feet apart, they decided that was about right and they dug for their guns.

THEY were matched about as even as anybody could be. They drew fast enough, but to Little Bill it seemed to take an hour for them to whip those guns out, thumb back the hammers and squeeze the triggers. Even though Little Bill knew what was coming, he still flinched, but the guns each popped a little and that was all.

For a moment, the two cowboys just stared, each looking like he was wondering why he wasn't dead. Then, quick, they rolled back the hammers again, but neither one pulled a

trigger. They looked more uneasy than bloodthirsty.

"Wait a minute," Jack Lowell said finally, looking a trifle puzzled. He pointed his gun down at the ground and pulled the trigger again. There was another funny little pop.

Both Jack and Ed Winters looked so surprised and everyone else so dumfounded that Little Bill just had to bust out and laugh. Then somebody else laughed and finally everybody joined in. Even Jack began to grin kind of sheepishly and Ed Winters grinned right back and finally stuck out his hand. Jack couldn't grab it fast enough.

After they'd shook hands and apologized to each other, Ed dumped the cartridges out of his gun and hefted them in his hand and everybody crowded around to see what was the matter with them. Of course they were some of the ones that Little Bill had taken the powder out of for his firecracker and then planted in Ed's six-shooter while he was bulldogging. And Charley had done the same to Jack Lowell.

Ed took the lead out of one and shook it and of course no powder came out. Then he added two and two together pretty fast for an ignorant cowboy and looked around for Little Bill.

But Little Bill was lined out like a wild mustang, and about every ten feet there'd be a puff of dust where his heels were digging in. He headed straight for the Wilson's wagon and was some relieved when Clara grabbed him by the arm and dragged him into the family circle.

Little Bill knew he was safe for the time being, because nobody in their right mind would tackle him with Mrs. Wilson around. So when she waddled off to look around the fair grounds before it got too dark, Little Bill was mighty content to drift along behind her. When it got some darker, he even let Clara hold his hand a little and he was sure surprised that it could feel so soft and firm at the same time.

"I saw you with Miss Seldon, today," Clara confessed shyly while they were walking along. "I think she's awfully pretty, don't you?"

Little Bill's forehead puckered up a little, trying to visualize Nancy Seldon, but it was pretty hard, what with Clara pressing up against his arms so tight.

"I reckon so," he said sort of carelessly, "but them Eastern girls ain't got much spunk."

Clara squeezed his arm, sort of happy like.

"You know," she told him, "Windy was telling Maw about you scaring the wits out of everybody this morning. Maw thought it was the funniest thing she'd ever heard. She'd like to died laughing when he described how Injun Jim come running out, and all." Clara turned and stared up into Little Bill's face. "It must have took an awful lot of nerve," she said, with awe.

Little Bill thought she looked pretty cute, what with her snub nose and all, and her eyes shining like that.

"Shucks," he said, throwing out his chest a little, "that wasn't nothin'. Why, if them rannies mess with me anymore, I'll blow that old bunkhouse plumb off the ranch next Fourth of July."

BLACKSTRAP SHOWDOWN

DURING 1860 the country around the forks of the Platte river in Nebraska territory was mostly Indian land. Many are the true tales told by the sons of pioneers of the way in which their fathers drove off hostile Indians with blazing guns.

Mrs. Charles McDonald, the first white woman to make her permanent home in the region, dispersed Indians surrounding her home one night by an entirely different method. She made good use of her knowledge that a drunken woman was the only thing of which the otherwise fearless Sioux was afraid.

Beady black eyes were peering through the windows of the McDonald cabin, where she was alone. Her husband would not be returning for at least an hour. With Sioux warriors watching her every move, she did not dare to display her fear.

She moved to the pantry and came out carrying a bottle of brown liquid. She took a drink. Then another. She began staggering around the room, laughing and waving her arms. She sang a maudlin song. At intervals she took other swigs from the bottle.

One by one the Indians faded away. When her husband and a group of friends arrived at the cabin, Mrs. McDonald immediately became sober. The molasses and water mixture that she had been drinking was not as intoxicating as it had appeared to her savage audience.

—ELOISE DUVEL STONE.

HOT LEAD, HIGH IRON—

By
ED EARL REPP

Abe Douglas, bald-headed boss man-breaker of a cattle-land empire, cut Bob Bennett to ribbons with a flailing quirt, put the torch to his ranch and the boots to his dreams of a rich and peaceful range. But Bennett was the kind of hombre who'd always get up once more to fight again—even though the steel rails he battled for made his name hated by his honest cow-country neighbors!

Smashing Novelette of Frontier Railroaders

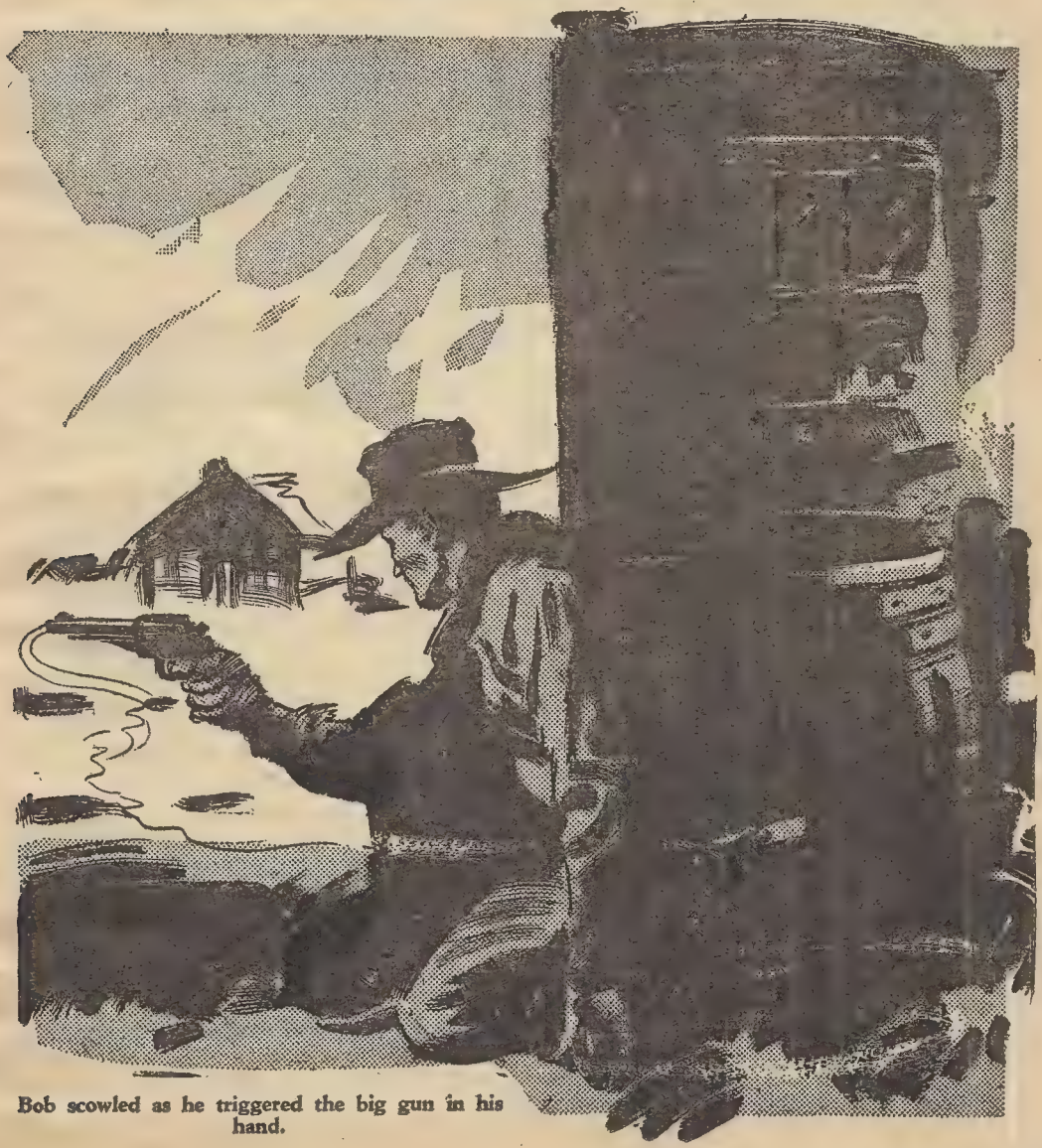
AND RAWHIDE MEN!

Chapter I

DEAD MAN BALLAST

BOB BENNETT pulled his black pony to a halt in the hot, sultry stillness of Windy Canyon. His head canted sharply to one side, trying to pick up the rumble of distant sound again, and his gray eyes explored the red sandstone walls that stretched ahead of him. His lean face, as brown as the double-rigged Texas saddle in which he sat, held a grim curiosity.

Half a mile ahead of him he could see the wooden framework of the new railroad trestle, spanning Windy Canyon through the heat devils



Bob scowled as he triggered the big gun in his hand.

that danced and vanished between the steep, rugged walls. And it was on the rimrocks surrounding the trestle approaches that he bent his suspicious gaze.

The tiny forms of the construction gang resembled ants scattering off the high bridge. Bob heard the ripple of gunfire again and saw sunlight gleaming on metal. Some of the workers did not reach safety; he watched them fall into space, and he turned his head at the sight.

"It was bound to happen," he muttered aloud, putting the pony to a rocky slide on his right. "Abe Douglas ain't letting any railroad into Dog Town to compete with his freight wagons. Maybe John Medow will listen to me next time." His wide shoulders slumped under the dusty denim jacket as he leaned forward in the saddle, urging all speed out of the cat-like animal under him. "Maybe it's already too late."

His big sombrero atop the tawny thatch of thick, black hair came into view on the canyon rim. Immediately his rangy, denim-clad body followed as the black scrambled onto level ground. Yanking his Army carbine out of the saddle boot, he raced toward the bridge. If the raiders before him weren't too many, he might be able to scare them off. . . .

The poorly-armed construction crew was barricaded behind stacks of raw lumber and pilings, and their erratic marksmanship was futile, Bob saw at once, stopping his pony behind the huge-stacked little work locomotive on the gleaming rails that halted one hundred yards shy of the trestle. The half dozen, heavily-armed riders hemming the besieged men in a large half-circle had not seen Bob's approach, sheltered by the work cars.

He heard the crackle of burning wood and felt the bite of tangy smoke in his throat. Several men on foot were applying torches to the piles of creosoted lumber stacked in orderly rows at the end of the track. Six months of gruelling labor, financed with the hopes and prayers and desperately-needed money of a hard-hit range, was being destroyed before his eyes!

Bob snuggled the carbine against his muscled shoulder. As he notched the sights on one of the torch carriers, his finger squeezed the trigger. But he couldn't callously kill a man, and he swore at that weakness now. The man stiffened as the bullet plowed through his leg, then tumbled into the dust. Another torch carrier went down. Pumping another shell into the chamber, Bob triggered again, saw a third man scramble for shelter.

The two remaining men dropped their torches and swung about. Bob emptied the carbine and knew he hadn't stopped them. Dropping the smoking weapon, he slid the big Colt .45 out of the holster on his hip. The mounted men were still unaware of his presence. With the two hombres ahead of him out of the way, he would be in strategic position to deal with the others. If they drew their friends' attention, he didn't have a chance.

Quitting the saddle, he slapped the well-trained black on its sweaty rump, knowing the animal would move out of direct bullet range. Slipping between two of the work cars, he lingered in their shelter long enough to spot the two men sneaking up, guns on the ready. They were very confident, he thought, or they would have raised an alarm and brought help from their comrades.

Bob waited until the creeping men were close enough for him to hear their whispers. They began circling the front end of the locomotive. Stepping out into the open, Bob called out:

"Back here, you warthogs!"

Startled, they whirled to face him, flame and smoke blossoming from their guns. Bob scowled as he fired, tawny hair framing his lean face, feeling the poker-hot bite of a bullet across his ribs as he triggered the big gun in his hand.

Each bullet touched a man at the point-blank range, sent them running for safety. Bob raced behind an untorched stack of logs, wondering if the gunshots were lost in the leaden fusillade that swept the construction camp.

"John Medow'll be damn glad I invited myself into this trouble-shooting chore," he swore softly as he eased closer to the scattered ring of shooting riders. "It'll gall the old son's pride to admit I was right in leaving a ranch to rock along the best it can without me. By hell, I was right, too. If Abe Douglas burns us out here, we're sunk. He'll take over this whole country just like he's always planned to do!"

Spurred on by his bitter thoughts, Bob cut down on the circling riders. He saw a horse go down in the confused tangle. The raiders spotted his position then and spread out in deadly pattern about him.

CROUCHING behind the log barricade, Bob hurriedly reloaded his gun. When they learned there was one man facing them, they would rush him. At the most, and shooting to kill, he wouldn't get more than two or three men before they riddled him with lead.

Over the quickening gunfire, the thunder of pounding hoofs grew loud in Bob's ears. Looking back, he recognized the two horsemen racing toward him, guns blazing in their hands. John Medow's fat little body and flowing snow-white beard were synonymous with Dog Town range. The big bull of a man sitting his saddle so easily beside him would be Harl Dempster, owner of the construction company.

Fired with new hope, Bob raised to meet

the charge of the raiders. He stared perplexedly. They had wheeled about as one man and were quartering along the rimrocks at a dead run, taking their wounded with them, leaving behind a boiling cloud of dust that rose slowly to reveal the gutted ruins of the construction camp.

John Medow and Harl Dempster jerked their blowing mounts to a stop before Bob. "Watch them coyotes run," Medow growled. "You ain't even dirtied your gun, Dempster. Why not?"

"Don't talk like a damn fool," Dempster snapped, sliding his gun back into its holster. His close-set eyes blinked from under his heavy-boned forehead with the malevolence of a desert rattler. "I ain't wasting powder at long range."

"Then get your crew to fightin' these fires! At least they can save part of our supplies." Medow's roly-poly body hit the ground with a bounce as he quit his horse and waddled around surveying the wrecked camp with his deceptively mild blue eyes. "What the hell happened, Bob?" he asked. "And how-come you let it happen?"

"Just like I said all along," Bob answered. "We're letting too close to town. Abe Douglas aims to stop us."

"I can believe that now," a cool, feminine voice broke in from their rear. "I always thought you worried too much, but I was wrong."

Startled, Bob turned to see Rose Medow clambering out of the locomotive cab. She wore levis and a snug blue shirt, and a flat crowned Stetson sat at a jaunty angle over a mass of coppery hair. She was almost as tall as Bob, but the rounded contours under the denims fenced her off as something special on anybody's range. And the way she could handle the holstered pistol at her hip was silent tribute of Bob's gun-teaching.

Old John's cherubic face got deathly white. "I gave you orders to stay away from the camp," he fumed. "I oughta lay you over my knee and belt you where it'd do the most good."

Rose smiled. "You've been threatening me for years, papa mine. Harl is teaching me to run the engine. I ride out here every day."

"John's right," Bob said, feeling the jealousy knot up inside his chest at mention of Dempster. "Today's just a sample of what's coming. I'm thinking you'll listen to me now. Did you get a look at those hombres. John?"

"They're Abe Douglas' men," Medow agreed. "Hell's goin' to pop, Bob. That's what I came out about. I talked to Douglas not more'n two hours ago in his office. The dirty son has managed to get his hands on the loans we raised in Austin. He put it to me straight. Either we quit our railroad now —pull out with what cash we still got on hand —or he'll wreck us."

Bob squared his broad shoulders. "A couple more raids like this one would turn the trick. Douglas is showing his hole cards, only I never figgered on them being so strong." He stared down into Medow's grim face. "You told him to go to hell, I take it?"

"That I did." A slight grin bent the corners of the old man's seamed mouth. "I even laid a gun alongside his greedy head when he got nasty about it."

Looking about the camp, Bob saw that the construction workers had stopped the flames from spreading. Dempster was in a little huddle of men by the canyon rim, and Bob eyed them suspiciously. No ordinary laborers these. Hard-looking and cold-eyed, they packed guns at their hips, and in his past weeks along the railroad right-of-way he had never seen them lift a finger to help the steel rails crawl nearer to Dog Town.

Dempster stared in Bob's direction and muttered something to his men. They walked toward the work engine, fanning out behind their huge boss, and there was a cold purpose in their deliberate movement. Dempster stopped a pace from Bob.

"I contracted out to build a spur line from Gila Junction to Dog Town," he snapped. "There was nothing in the contract that said my men were to be murdered on the job. We're not going back to work until you and Medow can guarantee that it's safe to do so!"

Chapter II

THE DOOMED FIGHT BACK

BOB'S glance played across the almost completed bridge and along the newly-graded roadbed that wound its way toward Dog Town, less than twenty miles distant. A few more weeks would see the rails laid, and the DT & GJ Railroad Company would become a lifeline, bringing new hope and courage to the struggling cowmen of this secluded range.

"You knew the risks when you took the job," Bob said softly. "You didn't worry about your men then. Might there be another reason why you want to stop work, Dempster? Such as letting us lose everything we own if we turn our company over to a receiver—meaning Abe Douglas?"

Dempster's face darkened. "No two-bit cowman talks to me like that," he growled. "I'm going to teach you some manners. Shuck your gun, if you've got the guts, and take the fist-whipping you've got coming!"

The man's arrogance and lack of cooperation since work along the right-of-way had begun had galled Bob constantly. Dempster needed a lesson. As the construction boss

handed his gun to one of his men, Bob unbuckled his gun-belt, and inside him was a feeling of satisfaction.

"Just to keep things clean," Rose said, as Bob handed his gun-gear to old John, "I'll have my gun ready in case anybody tries to butt in." The muzzle of her pistol covered the group before her.

"May the best man win," she whispered.

It became clear to Bob, this sudden clash forced upon him by Dempster. Their fight was a personal matter over Rose. Before the big man came along, Bob had taken it for granted that she would become his wife and take over the sprawling adobe ranchhouse out on his Desert Oasis range. But Rose had spent much of her time with Dempster since his arrival, and the fact had tempered Bob's every thought.

"I'm ready," Bob warned, moving forward.

Dempster glided toward him. The man had peeled off his shirt, and, sizing up his opponent, Bob realized the odds were heavily against him. He was out-weighed by thirty pounds, and Dempster's hairy chest and arms were padded with muscle. Under his shaggy brows his yellow eyes gleamed cruelly.

The fight would have to be brief if he won it, Bob knew, and he moved fast. As Dempster rushed him, he shifted his booted feet and swayed his body to one side, feeling the man's iron-hard fist scrape past his ear. Before the giant could regain his balance, Bob's return blow was on its way.

His heels dug solidly into the dusty soil as he swung from his boot tops, feeling his fist smash full on the bridge of Dempster's nose. Blood spattered down on the man's hairy chest, and his head rolled back. He staggered in his tracks, then went down with a crash that sent a blanket of dust billowing over him. His nose a bloody ruin, he rolled over on his back and tried to get up, but his paralyzed muscles wouldn't respond.

Dempster stared up at him and Bob saw mingled hatred and respect in his eyes. Rubbing his bruised knuckles with his left hand, Bob grinned a cold invitation at the silent onlookers.

"Anybody else feel proddy?" he asked.

They shifted uneasily but no one made a move. Buckling on his gun-belt and appreciating the heavy feel of his Colt against his thigh, Bob turned to Dempster. The man had struggled to a sitting position, was huddled on the ground like a huge, whipped yet defiant cougar.

"Put your bridge gang back to work," he warned. "Our boys'll be on the job soon as I get word to 'em. We'll guard your workers from here on into town. These rails will be laid on time if every honest man on this range has to work with one hand and hold a gun in the other!"

An amused look crept into Dempster's eyes. "You're wasting your time, Bennett," he mumbled through swollen lips. "You're licked. Abe Douglas bought me out last night. I'm working for him now."

Bob heard old John's fervent curse and Rose's quick intake of breath as from a great distance. He groped for words and found only a numb feeling inside him. This was far worse than anything he had feared.

"Douglas won't get away with it," he muttered, yet in his heart was the dread knowledge that the fight was already lost.

Dempster climbed to his feet. "Maybe not, but he holds aces in his hand. When he raids his own camp, like he's just done, he's showing you how far he'll go. I got my orders. Not a man goes to work here until he gives the word. Better go in and talk it over with him."

"And let one of his hired killers shoot me down on sight?" Bob's voice was derisive. "This is war, mister. There'll be no more talking—except over sixguns."

Old John broke in. "Wait a minute, Bob. Douglas left a door open a while ago, only I didn't know what he meant. 'I ought to shoot you,' he said after I whammed him with my gun. 'I'm givin' you one more chance. You'll be back pronto, whinin' like a hungry hound dog and lookin' for scraps. I'll be here in my office,' he says, 'and my men will let you in. But don't try it twice. It won't be that easy next time.' So we got one chance left to dicker with him."

Bob heard the oldster out in bitter silence. And as the trio swung into saddles and put the idle, ruined camp behind him, he told them what he planned to do. "Bringing the railroad into Dog Town was my idea. I'm reponsible for this mess. Either we take this last chance to make peace with Douglas, or the whole range goes bust. He's been after my outfit for a long time but I wouldn't sell. Now he's won. If giving him the Desert Oasis will save the rest of you, I'm going to do it."

"No, by hell!" old John blurted through his beard. "We won't hear of it! You'll do no such thing!"

Rose looked at him strangely, a funny expression growing on her tanned face. "You'd give up everything you've slaved for all these years?" She shook her head in wonderment. "We won't let you, Bob. We've no right to ask it of you."

The argument lasted all the way to the Meadow ranchhouse. And in the end, Bob finally consented to face Douglas that night without dangling the Desert Oasis before him as bait.

A THIN sliver of a moon hid Dog Town's desolate dirtiness as Bob rode down Main Street with old John and Rose. They dismount-

ed at the hitchrail fronting the rambling building at the south end of town and containing Douglas' freight office and quarters. Here under the flickering light of huge kerosene lamps Mexican hostlers moved about the big stock corrals and the barns. Others were noisily unloading huge freight wagons beside spacious platforms. In the background, stacks of baled hay loomed darkly beside the mule corrals, sending a fragrant smell into the street. The bulky outline of new, stored freighters was visible through the yawning doors of a big barn.

Bob thought of the new railroad station that was going up at the north end of town. Grimly he compared its weak challenge against this strongly established competitor. But it would grow if given a chance, and if it did, Abe Douglas' blood-sucking stranglehold on this country would end.

"Stay here and watch the horses," he told Rose, feeling the cold weight of unseen eyes upon them. "If any of Douglas' hired toughs show up, you know what to do?"

Rose whispered, "I know," and only by the pressure of her warm fingers on his hand did she betray emotion.

He turned away, shaken by the knowledge that she had made her choice between Harl Dempster and himself. It made his determination the greater, knowing that in fighting for the railroad he was also battling for the one girl in the world for him.

A shaft of yellow light spilled through the office door onto the boardwalk outside. Followed by old John, Bob opened the screen door and entered. As in the past, the rank smell of the place irritated him. The dirty floor was covered with waste paper; there was evident need of a spitoon. The raw timber paneling the walls was unpainted and streaked with spider webs and a mass of garish calendars and time schedules. An ornate lamp sat on the battered desk at the back of the room, lighting the heap of papers and letters that covered its dingy surface.

Douglas sat behind his desk staring at them, a human spider crouched in his web awaiting his prey. He was a tiny man with a small knobby head that sported a white patch of sticking plaster over one ear. A dirty, red shirt covered his hunched shoulders, was stuffed carelessly in the baggy duck trousers that sagged about scarred boots. Thick lensed glasses perched on his button nose, and his head was thrust forward on his thin neck like a snapping turtle's.

He said softly, "I expected you *gentlemen* earlier." His hand slid up to finger the patch on his head. "You've decided to talk business tonight?"

"You know why we're here." Bob pushed forward until only the desk separated them. "Dempster just told us that you bought him out. What do you intend to do?"

"So the big fool talked, eh?" Douglas' pale, whiskerless face showed his displeasure. "Now you know the set-up. I'll deal with you—my terms. There isn't much you can do about it. I've checked carefully. Every Douglas-hater on this range has hocked almost all he owns and put it up as security on your negotiated loan."

He leaned forward, chuckling. "The time clause written into your contract will ruin you, Bennett. Thirty days more to establish a daily run between here and the S.P. at Gila Junction. You'll never make it."

"You've given us one chance," Bob hedged. "If Dempster doesn't put the rails through in time—and he can do it easily—we can take it to court. It would look bad for you. We'd win our case."

Douglas waved a skinny hand. "More talk," he scoffed. "You're broke. All of you. Lawsuits cost money. And there isn't a lawyer in the state can fight my own attorneys. However—" he swung about in his swivel chair as though dismissing them "—if that's the way you want it, there's nothing left to discuss. Good evening, *gentlemen.*"

"Wait a minute," old John cut in. "Wh-what's your proposition to us?" And knowing part of the strange feud that separated these two men who had settled Dog Town range as partners, Bob could guess the gall those words put in Medow's mouth.

"I want two things." The soft words sounded very loud in the sudden silence. "One of them is a controlling interest in your company. My freight lines will be ruined by the competition. That's the only way I can protect them."

Bob snapped, "The railroad will double your business, and you know it. All the towns along the Border will welcome your freight wagons. You've got a gold mine."

The little man's smile was not a pleasant thing to see. "True," he agreed. "But why take half the profits when all of them are available? I'm a hard-headed, practical business man, not a dreamer."

"The other thing, Douglas—the thing you wanted?" old John said hoarsely. "Say it, man? What is it?"

Douglas' reply came soft and low. "A foolish question, John. It broke up our partnership and turned us into enemies. It can be settled only one way. You know what I want . . . Rose!"

Medow growled like some berserk animal and his hand sped for his gun. Wrapping his arms about the old man, holding him helpless, Bob stared through blazing eyes at Douglas. Dimly he realized that he was quivering from head to foot like a wind-broken horse.

Many things were clear now. The bitter feud between the two men—their unreasoning hatred of each other—the lengths to which Abe Douglas had gone to ruin this range, because in ruining it he was destroying John Medow. But uppermost in Bob's mind was the knowledge that some day he would have to kill Abe Douglas.

"We're leaving," he said, forcing old John's struggling form toward the door. "We'll see the others and tell 'em what's happened. Whatever they say goes, Douglas, and I already know what they'll do. I'll be back tomorrow with our decision."

Medow twisted in Bob's arms. "I'll be back, too!" he clipped. "We'll settle everything next time!"

Douglas half rose from the chair. "There won't be any next time, John. Don't forget it. I'm buckling on my gun tonight and I intend to use it. Bennett, I'll see you tomorrow."

Chapter III

SHOWDOWN!

ALL night long the men who were trying to bring the rails to Dog Town straggled into the Medow ranchyard as word reached them by the hard-riding messengers, summoning them to the meeting. Dawn streaked the eastern sky and paled the flickering lamps in the crowded front room when their decision was made.

"What'll it be?" Bob asked, watching the circle of tense faces about him. "Every man here has a chance to save his future. You can give in to Douglas—or you can fight him."

He listened to their heavy breathing and thrilled to the smell of leather and cow and horse that was on them. Theirs was a hard decision. If they defied Douglas, some of them were certain to die; the knowledge was there in their weathered faces.

Bob spoke again. "Nobody has to listen to me. Maybe you shouldn't after letting me talk you into this railroad deal. But I stand to lose as much as anybody else. As I see it, we haven't got much more to lose anyway. I'm for fighting. We can hurt Douglas plenty. Burn out his barns, raid his road stations, smash his wagons and run off his stock. There's enough of us to do it. Maybe he'll see things our way if we show him we mean business."

A gnarled cowman named Ed Reddy got to his feet. "That sounds good to me!" he snapped. "Hell, we might as well go down tryin'. What happens when any of us go into town? We put up at Douglas' hotel, eat in his restaurant, try and borrow money from his bank—have to trade at his stores—and pay cash for the privilege. If he gets his hands on our railroad, it'll only get worse. I say fight!"

Old John took the center of the room. "When we started our road, what did we have in mind? New people, new business, and a chance to crawl out from under Douglas. Now we got our backs crowded against a wall. Douglas has outsmarted us. The only thing left to do is fight!"

"We're wastin' time," somebody muttered. "Let's fight!"

They made their decision, and Bob felt pride in being one of them. "Oil up your guns and pack plenty of shells," he told them. "I'm taking word to Douglas."

OLD JOHN and Rose joined him at the hitchrail in the yard as he was tightening the saddle girth about his black's belly.

"I feel like I'm to blame for everything," Rose said soberly. Deep shadow rimmed her smoky eyes. "I heard Douglas last night. It explains a lot of things that I half suspected. You'll be careful, Bob? Promise me that. You don't have a chance, one man against all those hired gunmen."

"Watch Douglas," Medow warned. "He used to be hell-on-wheels with a sixgun. Just tell him what's what and get away from there."

"I'll tell him," Bob nodded, swinging into the saddle. "There won't be any trouble this trip."

But as he put the miles behind him, the deadly premonition that trouble was only beginning beat at him with icy fingers. . . .

Abe Douglas was not in his office. He was out inspecting his newly-acquired construction company, Bob was informed. An hour's ride through the heat of the climbing sun brought him within sight of the man. Douglas stood watching a gang of red-shirted laborers at work on a shallow cut. Dempster's huge bulk loomed beside him, and several gun-hung, hard-eyed men lurked nearby. They turned to face Bob as he rode up and leaned forward over the saddle horn, looking down at their boss.

Bob's lean face was as expressionless as an Indian's. "The rails go through on schedule," he said brusquely. "We'll fight for our rights—if that's the way it's got to be. You got any word I might take back with me?"

Behind his thick glasses, Douglas' eyes blinked rapidly. "You boys are too . . . ah . . . impetuous," he said gently. "I've been thinking this thing over. Maybe I did push you too hard. Dempster has his orders. There won't be any more trouble, unless you stir it up."

"You don't look sick," Bob's voice was sarcastic. "And you're not doing this out of the goodness of your heart. What'll it cost us, Douglas?"

"Nothing, nothing at all." Douglas looked like a chaparral cock that had just killed a big rattler. "Just go on back and tell your friends that track will reach town on schedule."

The rapid pound of hoofs grew loud in Bob's ears. Amazed and wary of Douglas' about-face, he turned to see Medow yank his lathered pony to a stop beside him. The old man's eyes glared wildly, and his lips raged incoherent curses as he pointed a shaking hand at Douglas.

"Rose!" he cried. "I tried to argue with her after you left—she wouldn't listen. Her mind was all made up! She took her clothes and moved into town. She's goin' to marry that—that polecat!"

At first it didn't register. Bob stared blankly at Douglas' smirking face, watched the sudden scowl fade off of Harl Dempster's beefy features, and paid no more attention to old John's raging words. Then it came to him. This was the reason for the little man's sudden generosity. And it was like Rose; to offer to marry the man, hating him, making the sacrifice to save her father and the rest of them from ruin.

"She rode back to town and bargained with him last night," old John spluttered. "While the meetin' was goin' on."

For once, the oldster seemed helpless and unable to cope with this situation, and Bob hoped that he didn't lose his head and pull his gun. The two of them didn't stand a chance against Douglas' men; they needed to put miles and time and one hell of a lot of thought behind them.

Yet he couldn't keep the blaze out of his eyes, nor hide the anger that knotted the muscles of his lean, whiskery jaws and deepened the lines about his wide mouth. And though he tried to stop the words, he heard himself saying, "The girl doesn't know what she's doing. I'll talk to her, Douglas. She'll never marry you."

The scrawny man's face turned livid and he snapped a low order to his men. Snatching a coiled quirt off a nearby saddle, he sent its rawhide length slashing and hissing about Bob's face. The loaded tips bit like fiery buckshot. Douglas yanked savagely, dragging Bob out of the saddle and tumbling him in a crouched huddle down there on the freshly graded soil.

"I've taken enough from you!" the little man spat. "You've butted into this deal enough. Get up, Bennett, and take your whipping!"

Bob climbed to his feet and lunged at Douglas. Through tear-fogged eyes he saw the angry smile wavering before him, the heave of the thin shoulders as the lash bit across his face again. Covering his head with his arms, he struggled on. There were many more blows, cutting, razor-sharp, sucking the strength from him.

Many a man in that group of spectators turned his eyes away, sickened at sight of a man being cut to ribbons, wondering how any human could take such punishment and keep coming ahead for more. Choked whimpers came out of his dry throat. Time and again he went to the ground, pulled himself onto wobbly feet, his face a bloody, dirt-soaked mask. There had to be a limit, they knew, and finally it came. The bloody wreck before them went down, wobbled dazedly to hands and knees, stared vacantly at the dusty ground and collapsed face down on it.

Scrawny chest heaving for breath, Douglas stared down at the sodden ruin at his feet. "You forced me," he growled, yet his face was white with the knowledge of what he had done. "You've always been in my way. The next time I'll have to kill you, Bennett."

Old John had sat in his saddle, horrified, too shocked to move. Now he shook himself, cursed feverishly, and grabbed for his gun. The giant Dempster, who had eased up beside horse and rider, quietly reached up and tapped the old man behind the ear with the butt of his six-shooter. As Medow toppled out of saddle, Dempster caught him and deposited his limp form on the ground beside Bob.

"Load them on a wagon," Douglas said abruptly. "Take them back to town and see that the doc works them over." His voice hardened as he turned to his men. "Six of you ride out to Bennett's place. There probably won't be anybody home. If there is, gun them down, if necessary. Put the torch to house, barns, and corrals. And see that it burns to the ground!"

Chapter IV

BOOTHILL BECKONS

TIME, to Bob Bennett, became an unreal, confused thing that came and went for an eternity. Rose's white face hovered over him a lot and he recognized Doc French's trim spade beard. There were other faces, and the low murmur of hushed voices; the pungent smell of medicine and the bitter taste of it in his mouth. It was all a bad dream that he grew weary of trying to figure out.

One day he opened his eyes and could see very plainly. Rose was slumped wearily in a chair by the bed. "Where am I?" he asked weakly.

Her eyes brightened and she gave a low cry of pleasure as she bent over him. "Dad brought you home three weeks ago. The doctor almost gave you up. You took an awful beating."

"Beating?" he said blankly.

"You don't remember?" He saw the circles about her eyes and the recent sign of tears upon her face. "After what Abe Douglas did to you, you don't remember?"

It came back to him slowly, then in a torrent of recollection. And for the first time he became aware of the bandage covering his face, except for a slit over his eyes and nose and mouth. He tried to move and found his upper body, too, in bandages.

"The rails!" he worried. "Have they reached town? Do we still have a chance?"

"Yes, there's a chance. If Douglas keeps his word. His men are working, very slowly."

He looked up at her and asked, "Why are you here? John said you went over to Douglas, that you intended to marry him?"

"That's true." She turned her face away from him, but not before he saw the misery in her eyes. "You almost died—and I refused to marry him until you were well again."

"And now . . ."

"I—I'll keep my promise. I'll become Abe Douglas' wife on the day the first train rolls into town on schedule. There's no other way, Bob. Even Dad says so now."

A sudden, helpless fury roweled Bob. He wanted to take Rose by her soft shoulders and shake some sense into that pretty head. She had no business ruining her life, sharing her future with that little, greedy, range-mad monkey. What had happened to old John? Did he really intend to let her go through with it?

"You're a fool," he said, struggling to sit up in bed, knowing at once that it was a mistake. The effort brought a film of sweat across his forehead, and bands of flaming pain seemed to wrap around his lacerated shoulders. "Abe Douglas will never lay a hand on you," he panted, sinking back exhausted.

The room swam dizzily about him and he felt very drowsy. Before his eyes closed, he was dimly aware of Rose's warm lips against his mouth. And as she left the room, her low sobs remained with him. It was odd, he thought sleepily, for he'd never known the girl to cry before in his life.

OLD JOHN came in to see him soon after, and Bob gasped at sight of him. He walked listlessly and his shoulders sagged. His eyes burned hollowly out of sunken sockets, and his clothes clung to his gaunting figure. And when he spoke, the old fire and determination were gone from his bitter voice.

"Howdy, son," he muttered, slumping down on the bed. "Don't talk. I can answer the questions you're goin' to ask. Our road is nearin' town. We ain't had any more trouble with Douglas since the—the day he kicked us off the right-of-way. Nobody's convinced that he's playin' it square. Something's wrong there's a snake in the woodpile somewheres, but we can't see it."

The warm sunshine shafting through the open window revealed the deep seams lining his rugged face. "I got a feelin', Bob," he brooded. "We're licked. He's got us eatin' out of his hand."

Bob stirred impatiently. "Maybe not. What about Rose? You going to stop her from making a mess of her life?"

Wearily, old John shook his head. "She's got a mind of her own. You know that. Have you tried talkin' to her?"

"Yeah." The restlessness inside Bob boiled over. "She's crazy and headstrong and loyal. You know as well as I do that she can't keep Douglas from doing whatever he's up to. There's one thing for certain. If we don't go down in this fight, Rose is moving out to the Desert Oasis with me."

"Son," old John said hesitantly, "there ain't any Desert Oasis any more. Douglas burned it to the ground."

Bob took the news silently, revealing his hurt only by the sudden clouding of his eyes. The ranch had been like a child that he loved. Years of his life had gone into its planning, its building, and its growth. Now almost overnight it was gone.

It left an emptiness in his breast—an emptiness that immediately filled with reborn hatred of Abe Douglas.

"There's little more I can lose," he said aloud. "I'm cleaned out, flat broke. But I think I can see what Douglas is up to, and I'm going to lick him. How many people know the shape I'm in?"

"Rumor has had you dead twice since I brought you here," Medow said heavily. "Nobody thinks you'll ever get out of this bed."

Bob managed a grim smile through the bandages. "Good. We'll keep it that way. I'll be on my feet in a couple of days. Pass the word around that you're holding a meeting next week, the day before the deadline. I'll talk to 'em then."

"All right," old John said without enthusiasm, getting to his feet. "I'll tell 'em."

He shuffled dispiritedly through the door.

That same day, Rose quietly packed her clothes and moved into the hotel in town. And Abe Douglas, watching everything with shrewd eyes, put two and two together, and gave his men orders to shoot Bob Bennett on sight.

* * *

Deadline day! Just twenty-four hours before, the rail gang and the brawny, half-naked spikers had appeared over the horizon just ahead of the puffing little work engine, and track had been laid into Dog Town. Instead of cheering and celebrating, the town held itself aloof, wrapped in watchful silence.

For word had leaked out that no passenger train would make the hundred mile run back to Gila Junction.

Abe Douglas had said so, and men cautiously repeated the words.

Out at John Medow's place, they held their meeting. Ranchers, cowhands, townsmen. Anyone who had a stake in seeing the trains begin to roll, they were there some fifty strong. Carbines racked in saddle boots—repeating rifles and Greener scatterguns carried in the crook of steady arms—cartridge belts, gleaming with brass shells, sagging awkwardly about many hips.

Determination glowed deep in sleepless, blood-shot eyes, and grim purpose tightened unshaven jaws and bearded chins in common resolve. For tomorrow was the big day. The DT & GJ Railroad Company would become a reality—even though some of them died to make that dream come true.

When Bob Bennett stepped onto the rambling veranda that spilled its overflow of men into the front yard, a surprised roar swept over the crowd. Many of them pushed forward to grip his hand; others stared at the ugly, unhealed scars on his unbandaged face and said nothing, eager to hear him speak.

For they wanted action, even a fight if that was the way it had to be, but they had lacked a leader. Now they had one.

"I wouldn't of missed tomorrow if I had to get about in a wheelchair," Bob said huskily, realizing their dependence upon him and their unspoken joy at his presence. "Not one of us believes that Douglas won't interfere—we all know our train will be stalled somewhere along the line tomorrow." His hand went up to his face and gaunted fingers touched the scars. "I don't have to tell you how tough our job's going to be. But I've lain here in bed for the past week thinking this over. I've got a plan, if you want to hear it?"

He listened to their heavy, relieved sighs and watched them nod their approval. "A dozen of us will ride horseback to Gila Junction, starting at once. We'll make the trip home as passengers on the train. We'll slip in there early in the morning, so's not to warn Douglas. The rest of you will pair off and ride guard along the right-of-way. Keep a close eye on the bridges, especially the high one at Windy Canyon. I reckon that's all I got to say except—keep your guns oiled and your powder dry!"

Chapter V

DEATH RIDES THE RAILS

BOB rode into Gila Junction before dawn that morning, and the creak of his saddle gear sounded loud and somehow ominous in the sleepy hush that hung over the little cowtown. His eleven comrades had made camp two miles back, well hidden from the wagon road they'd followed all night.

He weaved in his saddle, feeling the thin, draining weakness run through him, realizing that his sickness still clung to him. He was in no shape to face trouble, he knew, and he swore at the stubborn streak in him that had made him drown his comrades' protests and ride on ahead. Twenty hours in the saddle had been too much.

Stepping down off his jaded horse in front of the S.P. depot, he knotted the reins about the worn hitchrack and stood there, feeling the physical weight of the empty streets press in on him. He wondered for the thousandth time if word had reached Douglas that he was out of bed and riding again. If so, unseen danger lurked here, danger that might materialize at any moment.

Inside the little brick building he roused the dozing night agent, a wizened little man, eager for human companionship at this lonely hour.

"Yep," the agent cackled, staring covertly at Bob's scarred face. "We got a passenger coach hooked onto your engine. You're Mr. Bennett, ain't you? Heard about your fight with Douglas. Your train's out there on the siding, all shined and draped with flags and bunting just like a Christmas tree. She's ready to roll once the fireman gives her a head of steam."

His bird-like head cocked to one side in speculative interest. "They're giving ten-to-one odds your train don't make the round trip. Five-to-one says it'll never reach Dog Town. Even money keeps her right here in the station yards. Which bet would you cover, Mr. Bennett?"

The agent stared into Bob's eyes and quickly looked away, and in the lamplight his thin face paled. "Take some good advice, mister," Bob said softly, "and stay out of this. It'll be healthier."

Turning on his heel, he strode out the door, and there was no defeat in the swing of his squared shoulders. A growing admiration appeared in the agent's eyes. "Maybe I'm crazy," he said aloud, "but I'm taking some of them ten-to-one odds. That lad ain't going to be pushed around today."

Just outside the station door, Bob stopped to roll a cigarette. His sharp gaze probed over the silence about him. He saw the movement by the water tower too late; flame spouted brightly in the early dawn shadows and a steel-jacketed bullet buzzed past his cheek, ricocheting off the brick wall behind him. Ducking back inside the waiting room, he swore softly. The sound of that rifle would bring a swarm of curious people.

"Sheriff Ryan don't allow shooting," the

agent chattered from behind his cage. "He'll be here in no time at all."

The agent was correct. A slim, half dressed man appeared a few seconds later, wearing sneakers instead of boots, carrying a sawed-off scattergun in his hand. A star flashed brightly on the cowhide vest that flapped open over red woolen underwear.

"Name's Ryan," he bit out, eyeing Bob coldly. "I didn't expect to see you in town, Bennett. Somebody take a shot at you?"

"Yeah."

Openly Ryan stared at the scars on Bob's face. "This town's too hot for you. You bring any company? You'll need it."

"I'm not alone," Bob said, irritated at Ryan's manner. "You telling me I'm not welcome here?"

"To me, yes. To others, no." Admiration gleamed faintly in the sheriff's dark eyes, winked out. "Abe Douglas aims to keep you off that train today. There's plenty of hired guns drawing his pay, though I've no proof of it—couldn't arrest anybody if I did. This town's a loaded powder keg. All it needed was you to touch it off."

Bob's thumbnail rasped absently along his shell-studded belt. "The train rolls at eight. A dozen of us will be on it, Sheriff. We won't be hunting trouble, but we damned sure won't dodge it."

"It's your fight," Ryan grunted. "The sooner that train crosses the county line, the happier I'll be. I'll see that your party gets aboard."

As the sheriff glided toward the door, Bob said, "If we whip Douglas, we'll be needing a new star-toter in Dog Town. You be interested in a better paying job?"

Ryan grinned coldly. "Money always talks to me, Bennett. If you ride that train back here tonight, we'll talk it over."

THE little band of riders came out of the badlands to the south just five minutes early. They sat their saddles easily; each man carried a carbine across his lap; and their grim silence matched the unspoken challenge of Gila Junction.

They rode into the crowd that surrounded the shiny work engine. Morning sunshine played on its big brass bell. Flags and decorations waved from lines strung to the high-belled, smoke-belching smokestack. Bright with paint and varnish, the tourist sleeper, just purchased from the S.P., was coupled on behind, ready to roll.

A sudden hush wiped away the crowd's merriment, leaving only the throaty roar of the wood-fire under the boiler and the hissing sound of escaping steam. Harl Dempster loomed large in the tiny cab, and sight of the man brought a cold sweat across Bob's face. Where was the engineer who had worked the construction job?

Dempster grinned as Bob reined his mount up beside the cab. "Knew you'd show up, Bennett. Abe was expecting you."

"Where's the engineer?" Bob asked shortly, wondering if trouble had already started.

"That drunken boomer!" Dempster's curt words were bitter. "Abe gave him fifty dollars and a bottle of cheap whiskey. You won't see him today."

Bob slid out of saddle and climbed into the cab. "Then you're the only gent around here that can run this engine. You're going to become our engineer today. Start working!"

"I have." Dempster pointed a big finger toward the roaring fire-box. "Who do you think fired her up?"

Bob's eyes showed his astonishment. "I reckon Abe Douglas told you to help us out," he said skeptically, slipping his gun out of leather. "Come clean, mister. The ride to Dog Town wouldn't be very pleasant—with a bullet inside you."

"Douglas doesn't know I'm here." A dull crimson burned the big man's face as he faced Bob squarely. "I got a story to tell, and it ain't a pretty one. I hope you believe it. It'll tell you why I'm here and it'll clear up a lot of things."

"I'm listening."

Dempster cleared his throat, plainly embarrassed. "When I first hired my outfit out to you, I was honest enough. Then after I met Rose, I hated your guts because she intended to marry you. I did my damnedest to take her away from you. It was strictly a personal matter until Douglas showed me a way to suck you under. He talked of money and power and empire—and I lost my head. After I went over to him, my eyes opened."

Staring into those close-set, blazing eyes and seeing the rage that seethed there, Bob listened intently as Dempster went on. "I was to share everything with Douglas. Fifty-fifty. I didn't trust him. I put one of my men to shadowing him. I learned plenty. He wanted Rose, and he plans to get rid of me." There was an urgent plea in his voice as he said, "I won't let him touch the girl. I—I'd rather see you get her, Bennett. Does all this make sense?"

"It does so far," Bob told him. "Go ahead."

"There ain't much more to tell. Douglas figured on a drunken engineer today. In case the fool was able to run this engine, you won't find any bridge across Windy Canyon. They're all set to burn it. In case that happens to fail, you'll get a sixgun welcome in town. Douglas has plenty of respect for you."

"You make sense," Bob said, picturing in his mind the struggle they faced. "Just what do you expect from this?"

Dempster's fingers curled into huge, tensed fists. "With your help, I aim to kill Abe Douglas. It won't be no tea party. Only one of us is liable to come out of it alive. I'm gambling that man will be me—and that I still got a chance with Rose."

"God help you if this ain't on the level," Bob said in a low voice. "We'll ride this cab together."

Sheathing his gun, he joined his men and found them helplessly cursing the packed coach. "Ain't you got eyes!" a Douglas man jeered. "Reserved seats is all taken!"

Bob snapped a low command. Twelve gun muzzles swung up to cover the human-packed doors and windows. "We aim to get seats inside," he bit out. "We'll shoot our way in, if necessary. Make your choice."

Suddenly and silently, Sheriff Ryan's slim figure was there, siding them. As he eared back the hammers of the double barreled Greener in his hands, his cold voice rapped out, "Clear that coach! Or let a passel of blue whistlers do it instead!"

Faces paled, and the jeering stopped. Scared men fought to get out of sight, found themselves helpless targets in jammed windows and doors, shielding their comrades within. Someone's low, fear-stricken curse started the exodus. Men tumbled and pushed out of the coach like cows frightened into a stampede.

"We won't forget," Bob told Ryan, as his party climbed aboard the empty coach. "Be seeing you tonight."

"Good luck," was the sheriff's laconic reply.

IN THE cab, Bob took orders from Dempster and fed wood to the fire-box as the miles crawled past. Performing a fireman's duties, he found, was anything but pleasant. Wood splinters pierced his bare hands, grimy sweat soaked his denim shirt and pants and ran down his legs into his boots, and steadily the strength ebbed out of his bed-softened muscles. The smoky hotness, clinging to the cab, made him sick, and it was a long time in going away.

An occasional pair of riders waved as the train chugged past, cheering him with the knowledge of their support. So far, no trouble. It was too easy, and worry settled upon Bob like a shroud.

The past months spread out before him like a dream. There had been the opportunity to take over the railroad when its eastern backers quit in disgust, raging at the obstacles that called for more and more money to finance it. That was when Bob first suspicioned Abe Douglas. Then the man had purchased their loans and talked Dempster into turning against them. Everything had gone to him—even Rose. Thought of the girl brought a raw rage swirling over Bob. If she wasn't so stubborn, she'd see that Douglas was playing with her—that he had no intention of letting the railroad slip out of his clutches.

"Windy Canyon! Dead ahead!"

Dempster's shout snapped Bob out of his reverie. Bleak, black hills and waterless gullies surrounded the winding track, and a quarter mile ahead sprawled the canyon, a deep slash in this torn stretch of badlands, its rocky depths, silent, full of blue haze. It could swallow this puny train without effort. Bob shut his eyes at the thought.

"See any smoke?" Dempster's voice was tense.

"No," Bob answered, little icicles of fear forming along his spine. "Maybe my men scared trouble away?"

Dempster shook his head. "Not without a fight. Can you see the trestle? Is it still up?"

Bob looked. "Yeah. It's up. What'll we do? If we stop to inspect it, we may fall into a trap."

"And if we don't inspect it," the big man growled, "we may go through a weak section. Say the word, Bennett. Those are your men back there. Do we risk it?"

It was the hardest decision Bob had ever made in his life. A beaten range—his friends—his future hung upon it. But their only chance of winning this fight lay across Windy Canyon in Dog Town.

"Give her the throttle," he rasped.

As they thundered onto the bridge, bullets showered against the engine, their angry hum penetrating the noisy din that filled the cab. Fearful seconds passed before the trestle was crossed. Safely on the other side of the canyon, Bob drew a grimy sleeve across his smoke-blackened face.

"What in blazes happened back there?" Dempster bellowed.

"I've got a fair idea," Bob said. "We had a heavy guard posted on either side. They fought off Douglas' thugs, kept them from firing the bridge. So those disappointed hombres

ARE YOU BUYING VICTORY BONDS?

tried to pick us off with guns, hoping to stop the train."

A blazing sun rode directly overhead when the white adobe station in town, with its complement of warehouses and cattle pens and repair sheds, came into view. As Dempster braked the puffing engine to a stop, they watched a curious, reserved crowd surge forward.

"Let's get out of this," Dempster muttered. "The Douglas men in that mob would like to shoot me. So would your friends. Rose and Douglas are at the hotel, and a preacher's there, ready to tie the knot. You got any plans?"

"None," Bob told him. "Except for the men we got planted in town. They'll raise all kinds of hell, once we give a signal."

"The sooner the better," Dempster said, swinging out of the cab to the ground. Bob swung down beside him, carrying his carbine. As they walked down the street, the stillness grated on his nerves. He saw heavily armed men, eyeing him hostilely, didn't miss the faces behind the slatted hotel windows, faces that disappeared at their approach.

They were walking into a trap. Bob knew it. But he'd spent too many hours trying to plan this final meeting with Douglas. Always he'd failed to come up with an answer. Events had pulled him along helplessly; he'd face the man and fight him as emergency dictated.

Behind them, his men from the coach trailed at a respectable distance, sizing up the Douglas faction. He lost them as he turned into the hotel lobby after Dempster.

Abe Douglas was there, smiling coldly, dressed in a clawhammer coat and new trousers, looking cleanly scrubbed and uncomfortable. Rose stood beside him, wearing a frothy white dress, staring at Bob with shadowed, perplexed eyes. A black-frocked stranger, the preacher, stood before them, an open Bible in his hand. The lobby was rimmed with Douglas men.

"I missed you, Dempster," Douglas said, his sharp eyes sweeping over their grimy clothing. "You brought the train in?"

"I did."

Rage crept into Douglas' voice. "You knew my plans. You'll pay—"

The sound of distant gunfire choked off his words. A man pushed his way through the hotel door. "Boss—the barns!" he shouted. "They fired 'em! Hell's to pay all over the damn town!"

"Yeah," Dempster jeered. "Hell's to pay. I crossed you. Now I'm going to kill you! Bone by bone I'll break—"

The giant's mouth snapped shut, and a look of agony twisted his beefy face. It had happened fast. Screaming incoherently, Douglas plunged into him, a magically drawn gun in his hand. Ramming the muzzle against Dempster's side, he pulled trigger.

As the muffled report chopped off his words, Dempster stiffened, and his mighty arms gathered the little man against his big chest in a bearhug. He squeezed and Douglas' face showed his pain, while skinny arms and legs jerked in frantic effort to free himself. Bones popped, and the sound was loud in that stunned room.

Then like a mighty tree, hewn off at the roots, Dempster toppled to the floor, taking the little man with him, but turning loose his hold on him. Douglas struggled to his feet, the move breaking the spell within the lobby. Men bawled orders and curses. Sixguns roared, lead hummed and splintered dry walls and shattered glass windows, and the acrid reek of black powder filled eyes and throat.

A fury of gunfire played in the street outside, and men dashed outside to join it. But Bob had eyes only for Abe Douglas who stood weaving in the midst of this holocaust, trying to bring his stubby gun on a level, triggering when he did.

Swinging the carbine up, Bob squeezed the trigger, feeling the bite of a bullet across his thigh. He watched Douglas collapse on the floor beside Dempster's huge bulk, then turned his attention to the Douglas men left in the lobby. Rose snatched up Dempster's gun and joined him.

It seemed a hellish, crimson-splattered eternity before old John burst through the lobby door, a smoking six-shooter in his hand, and a worried look on his face until he spotted them. He took Rose in his arms and held her close.

"We licked 'em," he said happily. "We can start livin' again. New people, new stores, the railroad—"

"You lost the railroad!" a voice croaked, and they stared down into Douglas' up-raised face. A bloody froth covered his blue lips. "There ain't . . . nobody . . . to run the train back to Gila Junction."

Dempster's huge body moved. He laughed hoarsely. "They ain't licked . . . Rose can run it . . . taught her myself . . ." His breath rattled in his throat, and he went limp. On the other side of him, Abe Douglas breathed his last, cursing the men who had licked him.

Bob put his arm around Rose's waist. "Going to wear that pretty dress in the cab?"

"No," she whispered. "Not if I can put it to better use."

He kissed her. "If the preacher man didn't get shot in this ruckus, we can take care of that in a hurry."

And for the first time in his life, he discovered that she blushed very prettily.

THE END

His tail whipped suddenly toward the man-creature's seat. . . .

Jess Ludlow, two-bit freight boss, kicked in the snout a little animal who only wanted to make friends, and have his fuzzy throat scratched. That's why Jess found himself shoveling coal in hell—and pronto!

Four Hairy Feet of Hell

By RALPH YERGEN

TATER McCORD climbed down from the high seat of the loaded freight wagon and began to unhitch the six-mule team. Scattered pines cast cool evening shadows across the camp spot. Downslope, the windows of Bearclaw glistened through a green screen of branches. As a tall, reed-like man on a light sorrel horse came trotting up beside the wagon, McCord's stocky frame straightened, and a frown sullied the smoothness of his round, tomato-red face.

"I'll feel a heap relieved when we get this load to the Big Falls Mine," he sighed uneasily. "Settin' like a hen on a hundred boxes of dynamite all day bouncin' over them bumps ain't my idee of no tea party. How about tradin' jobs tomorrer, Saltweed?"

Saltweed Sanders, the rifle guard of the

freighting partnership, sheathed his Winchester carbine and slid lightly from the sorrel's back. He shoved his dusty hat to the back of his head, and the color of his hair matched that of his horse.

"Couldn't no hombre shoo them long-ears around like you, Tater. I'd get my pipestem neck twisted in the lines and hang myself. Anyhow, you got no call to grumble. Dynamite don't go around explodin' on its own hook. I once seen a man split open a boxful with a sledgehammer."

"I seen damn fools, too," Tater said wisely. "Me and the boomdust both got tol'able jarred up comin' over the hump from Cactus Junction. Canyons in the road deep enough to trap a buffalo, and rocks bigger'n a chief's wigwam. Wonder we got any wheels left on the wagon, or I got any hide on the sitdown corner of my manly figger."

"Shucks," Saltweed scoffed, as he began to manufacture a cigarette. "What if the stuff did blow up? You wouldn't even know what happened."

Tater dropped the yoke from the lead span. "No. But I'd sorta like to be around for that there Frontier Day celebration and hoss race in Cactus Junction next week. I put a few leaves on Itchy Witch to hook the Cayuse Derby. Anyhow, the powder wasn't all which give me the creeps, Saltweed. There was times along the road when I had a feelin' stronger'n hoss radish that some yahoo was watchin' us."

Saltweed's snort blew the makings out of his fingers. "Now you're gettin' plumb balmy, Tater. Dreamin' up spies, explosions and what-not. We didn't see a jigger for twenty mile' until we got right close to Bearclaw. Reckon what you need is a nice quiet spot with plenty of rest and a purty nurse to sort of bring you back to your nacheral state."

"Mebby you're right," Tater sighed, as he peeled sweat-soaked harness from the mules. "Mebby I got myself too blamed much headwork."

"Sure thing," the freight guard agreed. "Now look at Solomon, here. Ridin' a powder wagon don't give him no case of willies. Does it, Solomon?"

A fat bundle of bushy black fur interspersed with white quills tumbled out of the wagon and waddled up to Saltweed, rubbing contentedly against his boots. The freighters had captured the porcupine when he was as tame as any tabby cat. Although possessed of a natural armament of barb-like quills, he was perfectly harmless unless carelessly handled or abused.

Out of grave little eyes almost buried by coarse black hair, Solomon watched Tater McCord lead the mules away to the spring. Saltweed knelt and scratched the porcupine's furry throat. Solomon chuckled softly and tapped the ground with his quilled tail. Nothing gave him such a delightful sensation as to have his throat scratched.

Tater McCord returned with the mules and began to tether them to spaced tree trunks which plainly had been used for the purpose before. This was a popular camping spot with freighters. It combined the privacy of the forest with the conveniences of the nearby town.

Saltweed was whistling *Old Dan Tucker* with more vigor than melody as he cared for his horse. But Tater apparently could not get his mind out of its uneasy channel.

"I been thinkin' mebby some of Jess Ludlow's crowd was oglin' us, Saltweed," he said. "You know the story goin' around. About how Jess Ludlow is figgerin' to run us out of business so he can gobble up all the freight trade in these parts."

"I don't take stock in no such gossip," Saltweed scoffed. "I met this Ludlow hombre in Cactus Junction. He's a big cuss about two axehandles across the britches. But he seems like a right nice feller. Talked friendly and even bought me a drink of Old Firecracker. Reckon he ain't as much of a cutthroat as he's tagged."

Tater pulled the nosebags out of the wagon. "I recollects not all of your buzzom pals turned out to be such nice fellers as you figgered, Saltweed."

"Ludlow is different," the sorrel-haired guard said confidently. "He's a bizness man, like us."

"Mebby you're right," Tater admitted. "Reckon dullskullery ain't practiced by the real big bizness men, like us."

Tater finished feeding the mules and returned to the wagon, rubbing his stomach. He pointed to the buildings beyond the trees.

"Yon burg is bulgin' with prime steaks and mashed 'taters. Why should we work ourselves to a frazzle over a hot fire when there is dee luxe chawin' parlors in easy hoofin' distance?"

Saltweed nodded and grinned. "I'm hankerin' fer a hunk of huckleberry pie soaked in nice yaller cow's cream. Reckon the wagon and Solomon will be safe enough here. Nothin' never bothers Solomon. And nobody will monkey with dynamite. Let's leg it."

LEFT to his lonesome, Solomon became aware of an emptiness within his own stomach. He waddled on his short legs to a jackpine trunk and chiseled a tentative bite out of the bark with sharp, strong teeth. Bark was not to his palate this evening, he decided. Shuffling to a glossy green manzanita bush, he sampled a leaf with mixed reactions. It was spicy and tender, but he expected something better.

A small wooden box, left by some camper, attracted his gaze and he moved toward it. The box was empty, but a pleasant odor of dried prunes lingered within it. He scraped his teeth across the soft pine. Enriched by the prune flavor, the wood was much to his taste.

Solomon was well along in the process of consuming the box when a sound from the wagon swiveled his plump body about. He blinked at the sight of three man-creatures gathered about the high-wheeler as if inspecting its contents. One of the man-creatures was built as wide as both of the others combined.

With the edge off his appetite, Solomon turned and ambled toward camp. Being a very friendly porcupine, he enjoyed associating with visitors. And there was always the possibility of a pleasant throat-scratching from the visitors if they were likewise friendly.

The men were conversing in low tones. They appeared to be so interested in the cargo that they did not immediately notice Solomon's approach.

"It's dynamite. Tons of it," ejaculated the skinny, nervous man with the boatsail ears.

The broad-beamed man grunted. "Just as I figgered when we spotted it from the rimrock." He glowered abruptly, and his lower jaw thrust out in a militant manner. "It's headed for the mines at Big Falls. My wagons should be haulin' all the mine freight, damn it. It's a fust rate set-up, haulin' supplies in and gold out. Too blamed good for them two dumb rut-hoppers, Sanders and McCord."

"You surely ain't lettin' 'em get away with it for long, Jess," spoke up the third man, a bony-faced, hook-nosed hardcase who wore his sixgun as if it were his most prized possession. "If we don't chase them two out of business right soon, people will be sayin' Jess Ludlow has gone spongy."

The big man growled like a bear. A cold glitter appeared in his small, mud-colored eyes. "What you think we tailed 'em all the way from the Junction for, Cohawk? If this dynamite should hit the clouds all of a sudden, nobody would ever find a splinter of the old tub. Sanders and McCord would be out of business plumb pronto."

An understanding grin split the bleak lines of Cohawk's features. "So that's what you got in your saddle sack, Jess. A roll of fuse."

The man with the ears uttered a short, cackling laugh. Then his face abruptly froze to a cold scowl. "Why the hell didn't you fetch it along when we left the nags back there in the brush, Jess? These two geezers will be moseyin' back from town before long."

"Don't be an idiot, Veet," Jess Ludlow snapped. "We ain't blowin' up this wagonload of dynamite. Not now."

Both men stared. "But it's a natural, Jess," Cohawk argued.

"And he calls me an idiot," Veet said, in disgust.

"You are," Ludlow rumbled. "Both of you mugs. Why should we blow this load now? Sanders and McCord will soon be back. They won't suspect nothin'. They'll sleep tonight like fleas in a boar's nest. We'll sneak in here before daylight and blow them two rapscallions to goosegrease right along with the wagon. All the evidence will be blown to hell with 'em. It will be one of them regrettable accidents which nobody knows what caused!"

THE queer sounds made by the three man-creatures were meaningless to Solomon. Man-creatures always seemed to be engaged in silly chatter like the squirrels and the jays. He had grown accustomed to it. He was within a mule's length of the wagon when the skinny man swung about and stared at him.

"Look, Jess." The man pointed a crooked forefinger. "A walkin' pin cushion."

Jess Ludlow wheeled about heavily. "I heard about that tame porky," he rumbled. "Lives with Sanders and McCord. Here's my regards to that dumb son-of-a-bluffer."

With abrupt misgivings, Solomon watched the big man stride forward. As the heavy boot drew back, he felt a clear sense of warning. His back arched, and his armor of quills ruffed up in a defensive display.

Like a thunderbolt, the solid boot toe came zooming at Solomon's face. His movements were too slow and clumsy for him to dodge. The boot smashed hard against his nose. Pain shot through his head and body. He was propelled backward by the force of the kick. Over and over he rolled, coming to a limp halt on his belly beneath a jackpine.

Half dazed, he huddled there, his quills lifted, while the heavy laughter of the three men jangled in his ears. Pain streaks were still shooting through him. The taste of his own blood was on his tongue.

He was wounded in spirit as well. For he had advanced to the man-creatures in good faith and friendliness. In return, they had tendered him a cruel, punishing blow.

As Solomon nursed his hurts, he watched the three man-creatures slink out of camp into the dusky forest shadows. He was glad to see them leave. And a bit later, he was glad to see Saltweed and Tater return.

Both freighters were obviously of good cheer. They were munching something as they approached, and Solomon's smeller, bruised but none the less keen, picked up the odor of sweet apples. He began to feel better as he sensed a share in the fruit.

It came directly, in the form of two apple cores tossed in his direction.

"Wrap your jaws around them Winesaps, Solomon, you old wagonmaster," Tater said. "They're good for your complexion."

"They'll keep the hoss doctor away," Saltweed chortled.

Solomon consumed the cores avidly. They formed an excellent dessert after his entree of prune box.

Saltweed inspected the cargo. "Nothing monkeyed with," he announced. "Let's have a whiff of pipe pizen, Tater. Then hit the wool."

"Bueno. We got some nice soft dirt to sleep on tonight. Reckon I won't quit snorin' till the sun pops us in the eye."

"Me neither. And if it's cloudy, we'll likely sleep till noon."

After a good-night fondling by the freighters, Solomon shuffled away to the spring for a drink of the cool, sweet mountain water. When he returned, the camp was quiet except for a soft duet of rhythmic snoring. The mules were bedded down. Off to one side, Saltweed's sorrel horse scratched its neck on a pine trunk and nibbled at the brush.

Feeling an urge to explore, Solomon waddled down the slope to where the yellow lights of Bearclaw gleamed across the night-mantled sage. Queer sounds drifted from the town. Somewhere a piano jangled faintly. Some drunk bawled a lusty baritone.

These things of human making did not interest Solomon. He turned away disdainfully and climbed up the slope to where the pine forest formed an inky blotch against the star-jeweled sky. Above the eastern peaks, a pale wash diluted the night's web. The next minute, a bright sliver of moon was peering over the horizon. Grotesque black shadows appeared in the night. From some distant hill a coyote howled mournfully.

Fear of fang and claw were not a part of Solomon's mental make-up, for Nature had endowed him with a rare form of defense against predatory beasts. A coyote or wolf, if skillful and lucky enough, could turn him over with its nose and clamp fangs upon his unprotected throat. But both animals preferred to have no dealings with porcupines and would attack only if provoked by extreme hunger.

Solomon entered the forest, his broad feet silent on the thick carpet of pine needles. There were many sounds here in the deep woods. Sounds of the night, when wild creatures came out of their dens to feed and to prowl and to live their lives under the primitive rules of Nature.

He heard the soft thumping of a mule deer band along some hidden trail. And later the growling of a timber wolf. He spotted two bobcats slinking along a log in search of unwary prey. In the treetops, a great horned owl *whooed,* and from down in a draw came the unmistakable sounds of a badger digging in the earth.

These were the familiar sounds of the forest night, of which Solomon felt himself a part. He felt a strange, compelling urge to travel far into the woods to some distant ridge where man-creatures were unknown. He loitered there in the timber, mulling over the wilderness call.

Solomon's attachment for the mule-freighters was strong, however. And he did not forget the apple cores. He contented himself by climbing a tall pine to flex his muscles and to test his claws. It was near midnight when he returned to the quiet camp and crawled beneath the wagon. After all, there was no place like home. He curled in a furry ball on the shadowed grass. Soon he was dreaming of new camps and new flavors of castaway boxes. . . .

COLD white moonlight powdered the wagon camp when Jess Ludlow, flanked by his two hirelings, lumbered out of the forest shades and approached the highwheeler. Gun steel glinted as the skulking men peered into the tree shadows.

Beneath a nearby pine, two blanketed shapes stretched on the earth, mottled by moonlight prying through the branches. Steady snoring proved both freighters to be securely wrapped in the robes of slumber. The six mules appeared to be dozing. Somewhere a horse cropped grass rhythmically.

Jess Ludlow nodded in satisfaction. He leaned toward his left and whispered, "Veet, you mosey over there and keep an eye on them skinners. Likely they got smokers within reach. If they make a move, drill 'em both. They'll be blown into so many ribbons no lawman could ever find the slugs."

Veet slunk across the moon-lit space and crouched near the sleeping men, his revolver ready in his fist. Ludlow and Cohawk moved to the wagon and pouched their pistols.

"Bore one of the top boxes, Cohawk," Ludlow whispered. There followed the soft sounds of steel cutting wood.

"It's ready," Cohawk breathed.

"Then gimme the fuse."

Cohawk unrolled a ten-foot length of slender black tube. One end wore a brass percussion cap crimped tightly over it. Ludlow grasped the capped end and poked it firmly through the drilled opening into the dynamite box. When it was secure among the packed sticks, he let the loose end dangle to the ground.

"I'm usin' plenty of fuse," Ludlow explained. "We want to be a long ways off when she pops. It might even tear up Bearclaw."

"You think it might wreck the town?" Cohawk queried.

"What if it does? Sanders and McCord will

be out of business forever. I'll have a monopoly on all freight haulin' in these parts. I'll double my prices. People will have to pay up or haul their own. And we'll see that haulin' their own won't be healthy for 'em. This means a raise in wages for you and Veet besides gettin' a hell of a good laugh out of it."

"Yeah," said Cohawk uneasily. "But I'll laugh a damn sight easier when it's over with. You need help gettin' the fuse lit?"

"No." Ludlow produced a match from his pocket and removed his wide-brimmed hat. "I'll get down on the ground to light it. Where I can keep my hat over the match to hide its flare. We don't want to wake up anybody."

Solomon Porcupine came to his senses with a distinct impression that all was not well within the wagon camp. He was lying beneath the wagon, his dark coat well hidden by the black shadow. Sly sounds touched his keen ears. Man-creatures were so near that he could have brushed their boots with his tail.

Solomon remembered the man-creatures who had visited camp during the evening, and a sharp prickle of fear ran along the roots of his quills. For he definitely associated the man-smell in his nostrils with the unwelcome visitors. His back muscles bunched in the best manner of a porcupine preparing for defense. His quills bristled skyward, and his short neck drew shorter.

His little eyes rolled, and through the dark fringe of hair he saw the bulk of the largest man-creature hunkering near him. His fear increased sharply. He envisioned a rib-caving kick as he watched the man-creature's weight settle to within a few inches of his spiny back.

Abruptly a tiny glare stabbed Solomon's eyes. A new sword of fear thrust through his pudgy body. And with it linked a savagely awakened instinct of self-preservation. The involuntary power of it moved Solomon's muscles without any premeditation on his part. His tail whipped suddenly toward the man-creature's broad seat, driving a dozen needle-like quills deep into the flesh.

The harpooned freight czar shot into the air as if propelled by a mule's kick.

"Yow!" His bellow of pain rolled into the night.

Violent movement exploded through the camp. The man Veet was as thoroughly startled by Ludlow's strange action as were the rudely awakened freighters. He stared at his chief as if viewing a crazy man. When his eyes whipped back to the blankets beneath the tree, he saw Tater McCord's sixgun leaping off the ground powered by the mule-skinner's fingers.

"Kill the lobos!" Jess Ludlow howled.

Tater McCord cursed as a bullet nicked his elbow. He fired twice at the skinny figure of Veet, saw the man lurch sideways.

Beside the stocky mulewhacker, Saltweed Sanders was propped on one arm, his sixgun making fiery talk to the skulkers.

"It's Ludlow!" Saltweed yelled.

"Don't shoot into that wagon box!" McCord warned.

Bullets sprayed the tree branches above them. A slug snarled in the blankets at Tater's knee, ripping a long gash in the wool. The gunman Cohawk made a desperate lunge to get behind the protection of the wagon, but Saltweed's bullet changed his direction abruptly. With a yowl of pain, he galloped off into the night.

Jess Ludlow was ensconced behind the wagon, pumping lead over the top. To avoid exploding the dynamite, Tater was shooting too high.

Chance-taking was more in Saltweed's nature, and the slender guard lowered his aim to a point squarely between the big man's eyes. As he fired, he saw Jess Ludlow's gun bounce out of his hand. The man who aspired to be freighting king slowly wagged his head from side to side and slumped to the ground.

"What in the devil was Jess Ludlow and his gun bunnies up to?" McCord asked.

"Search me," Saltweed shrugged. "I heard a beller and woke up sudden-like. Grabbed my smoker just in time."

"The fuse!" a fear-shrill voice screamed. "Pull out the fuse, fer cripes sake!"

Tater stared at the gunman Veet, who had regained consciousness and was writhing helplessly on the ground, bullet-smashed ribs having robbed him of all ideas of gunplay. Suddenly the mulewhacker comprehended. Hurrying to the wagon, he found the hissing fuse and jerked it free of the dynamite box. As he hurled it into the timber, the cap exploded in a blinding red flash.

Tater McCord turned a withering glance at Saltweed. "You and your nice playmates."

But Saltweed was paying no attention to his partner. He arose from inspecting Jess Ludlow, who had become completely eligible for Boothill residence.

"Quills!" he blurted. "Ludlow is full of 'em. That's why he hollered. Old Solomon let him have the works right in the seat of the pants."

"Cussed if he didn't," Tater marveled. "Where is he? Come on out from under that wagon, you old hero. We'll buy you a bushel box of apples tomorrer."

"Lay you a ten-spot he eats the box first," Saltweed said, grinning as he scratched Solomon's throat.

Solomon chuckled softly and tapped the ground with his tail.

For Sale—One Badge, One Gun,

Dynamic Novelette of a Sheriff in Hock

Men called him "Judas," his brother, "sucker;" and his girl, "coward!" But Sheriff Matt Trevor vowed that nothing—neither his paralyzing fear or even the yellow-streak brand — would make him break his death-bed pledge to guard and protect the killer he'd sworn to hang!

One Man!
to the Grave

By BARRY CORD

Chapter I

"THE DEVIL IN HIS BLOOD. . . ."

HE WAS BIG, this man who entered brusquely and without knocking, into the sheriff's office. Big and hard, with the solid weight of fifty odd years in his thick body. Those years didn't show much in his blunt, sun-whipped features, in the hard clearness of his eyes. Time had brought him money and power, and had changed him not at all. He was still the man who had come over the Coahuilla Pass with a wagon, a wife and a hundred head of wild longhorn cattle and started the Circle Arrow on a patch of grass and a one-room log shack.

He closed the door behind him with stony deliberateness. His shoulders were stiff as he moved toward the lawman behind the desk.

Matt Trevor, sheriff, took a booted foot from the desk top and eased back in his chair. His voice was flat, without warmth. He said, "Hello, Hayden. What's on yore mind?"

The big cattleman paused in front of the desk. He thrust gnarled hands in his coat pockets and the gesture indicated flatly the temper of the man. He said, "They got away with two hundred head, Matt. Stuff I was figgerin' to throw in with Brand an' Jennings' trail drive." He moved his shoulders. "I don't like losin' them, Matt."

Matt lifted his left foot to the scarred desk top again. He was built like Hayden around the chest and shoulders, but he was six inches slimmer at the waist. And he was twenty-five years younger. The setting sun made a red streak on the desk top. Some of that red glow touched his hard, lean face.

"You didn't come twelve miles to town to tell me what I already know, Hayden," he said bluntly. "You got somethin' on yore mind. Had

it ever since I first drifted onto this range. You don't like me, and never did. You went out of yore way to show it. You've done everythin' but lock yore daughter up to keep her from seein' me."

Anger rose in him suddenly and he stood up, faced the other. "Damn it, Hayden! I never tallied you for a man who would hit another from behind. Let's have it out. What's between us?"

Hugh Hayden's hands clenched in his pockets; he seemed to keep them there with an effort. He said, "Shore." His voice was soft, like edged steel under velvet. "Let's begin back. Back about five years. Let's ride back along yore trail, to Jefferson County, Texas."

He smiled as the lawman stiffened. "I happened to be in Jedville at the time, Matt. The time this killer they call the Gallows Rider and his owlhoot bunch stuck up the bank. You were sheriff then, like now. There was a lot of talk, after. An' you faded away. Just up an' left."

Hayden's eyes were suddenly hard. "I never figgered I'd see you again. But you turned up on the Flats. Yo're sheriff. An' the Gallows bunch are in the section." He sneered. "Coincidence?"

The sheriff was a lean still figure, no longer angry, only bitter. He said nothing.

The cattleman's voice rasped. "They're all set with a hideout in the bad country west of the river. Hard to find an' mebbe harder to smoke out. Rustlin' my cows was the first move. But they won't stop there. There's gonna be hell along the river. An'," Hayden's voice changed, "yo're stoppin' them! Quick!" His hands moved in sharp emphasis. "*I* don't know how you'll do it. *But you will!* Or I'll dig into that Jefferson County incident. Dig deep. It'll be surprisin' what I'll find!"

Matt smiled bitterly. "Yeah," he muttered. "You'd be surprised." He watched Hayden turn, walk to the door.

The big cowman paused, looked back. "I could have stopped you from bein' elected sheriff. I didn't. I wanted to see what would happen. Wanted to give you a chance. Well, you got it!"

The words were an ultimatum that seemed to hang in the room after he closed the door behind him.

IT GREW DARK in the sheriff's office. Matt sat, staring at a poster he had dug out of a desk drawer. Moonlight made a pale splash by the desk.

Darkness obscured the legend on the poster. But Matt had read it many times and the description of the Border country outlaw who was terrorizing the territory was burned in his mind. The Gallows Rider.

Matt stared at the poster. But a woman's face seemed to look up at him instead, a patient, thin face with faded blue eyes. The face of a woman old before her years. Always—and he saw that face often—it seemed to plead with him. Like a voice from the grave. For the woman, his mother, was dead.

The poster crinkled under the sudden clenching of his fist. He remained like that, hand clenched, body stiffened, staring.

The man who had entered like a shadow was tall and thin. His wide-brimmed sombrero was pulled low over his eyes. He closed the door, and a mocking laugh sounded in the silent office.

"Hello, Matt." The man moved forward. His walk was light, like the prowl of some hungry cat. "Glad you didn't light up. I like to talk in the dark."

Matt drew a deep breath. He went back in his chair, his hand dropping to a holstered Colt. The lean caller sensed the move. Something about the man suggested he missed little. He was wary, alert, restless with a surging vitality. His voice barely reached Matt.

"You won't use it, Matt. Every man in the Forked River section, an' a hell of a lot between here and the Mexican Border would probably pray for a chance to kill the Gallows Rider. But *you* won't!"

"Fred!" Matt's voice was thick. "Some day, Fred, I'm gonna forget yo're my brother! Some day I'll forget ma. Then. . . ."

The Gallows Rider, with $2500 on his head, sat on the edge of the sheriff's desk and grinned into Matt's face. A walnut-handled Colt jutted close to sinewy fingers. A grim sketch was carved into that but: the sketch of a gallows and a hanging man. A strangely fatalistic design, as though the man who had carved it had no illusions about the way of his life.

"They always said, when we was kids, that we took after pa," the outlaw laughed. "There was the devil in his blood an' gun-lightnin' in his hands. Ma never really understood him." He shrugged. "Matt, you got pa's blood. Same as me. But mebbe you got somethin' from ma I missed. Somethin' that's made you line up with the law. But pa's blood is there, Matt. An' I think yo're a fool. With yore gunspeed, yore nerve—"

Matt straightened. "Damn you, Fred, don't make it hard for me to remember yo're my brother!" There was an edge to his voice that Fred recognized. He slid off the desk, faced the grim lawman.

"You'll remember!" he sneered. "An' because of it you'll do what you did in Jefferson County. You'll play dumb an' blind. You'll give us the break—"

"An' you won't pull yore stakes on us, like the last time," a thin, slurred voice intruded from the doorway.

The outlaw did not even turn. He knew who was there. Matt's gaze flicked to the wiry figure that crossed toward them on shuffling feet. Closer, Matt could see a thin, hawk-nosed face, beady eyes that glittered in the dark, and he knew that under the anthill sombrero the man's head was as bald as a billiard ball.

"I heard a skunk was shot, down by Presidio way," Matt said quietly. "When they said "skunk" I thought it was you, Poole."

Poole stiffened. His hand dropped to his gun-butt, hung there. "Some day yo're gonna pay for that," he said softly. "Pay plenty!" He edged forward, sneering. "But about this play. You won't be leavin', this time. Last time there was no Clara Hay—"

Matt exploded into motion. One hundred-and-seventy pounds were behind the fist that smashed Poole's lips and hurled the killer clear across the room.

Poole went down, limp. Yet the animal energy of the man flowed back almost at once, and he was twisting even as he hit the floor. He came up in a crouch, half conscious, blood oozing from his lips. His hand closed about his gun-butt.

The Gallows Rider lunged at him, clamped down on his arm. "Poole!" he snapped coldly. "Want to bring the town down on us?"

He swung around, still holding his henchman. Matt was on his toes, his eyes dangerous. "You mention her name again, Poole, an' by hell I'll take you apart!"

Poole wrenched away from Matt's brother. His body was hunched. He wiped blood from his chin with a trembling hand. His voice was a thick mumble. "I'll remember this, too, Matt!"

The silence hung. Fred's voice broke it, steely, confident. "That's enough from both of you. Poole, yo're mouth's too loose. Peg it down next time!"

Poole stiffened. Hate came suddenly into his eyes.

The Gallows Rider was swinging around, facing the lawman. "Remember, Matt," he rasped. "Play dumb an' blind—"

Matt was suddenly up to him, steel fingers gripping his vest and shirt. "You—damned—" For a split second Death hung poised in that room. Then Matt relaxed, pulled his fingers away. *"Get out!"* he commanded hoarsely.

Fred licked suddenly dry lips. He moved away, his eyes glinting, triumphant. Matt would do as he was told. Matt was a fool, but he would do it. Because of ma. Fred's chuckle was a coarse, inaudible sound. He, Fred, was not a sentimental fool. He was like his pa, with his pa's devil-may-care ways and with guns only one man could match.

He didn't look back. As they had come, like silent, drifting shadows of the night, they went. But their presence remained in that office; in the bitter mask that was Matt's face.

In the darkness of his office Matt Trevor fought his battle, harder than any he had ever gotten into. From his first responsible years he had fought. Fought the wild strain in his nature, fought to be what his mother had prayed for, against the lurking hell that was the heritage of his gunfighting father.

The moonlight splotch shifted as the moon rose in the sky. In the dark Matt's fingers toyed with the badge he had fought to wear. And his right hand rubbed, gently, with monotonous regularity, the butt of his sixgun.

Chapter II

RIBBON-POPPER'S LAST RIDE

SUNLIGHT made a splash of golden warmth in Cordon's dusty street. Matt came out of his office to watch the Lewiston-Cordon stage come in. Old Whiplash Galin, crack driver for the Whitehead Stage Company, handled his six-horse team with the reckless courage of a maniac. His long, drooping tobacco-stained mustache, his grizzled chin, his cracked "Whee-ee-ee!" as he tore down the slight slope to Cordon was a familiar, looked-for thing by its inhabitants.

Two-thirty. Old Galin was late, and that was a rare thing. Once he had lost a wheel, got it back on with baling wire and pulled into Cordon three minutes behind schedule. He had sulked all that day in bitter disappointment.

A half hour. Matt's eyes held worried lights. The stage was carrying a gun-guard and money in the express box. Matt started to move down the walk. The clerk at the branch stage office was outside, shading his eyes, peering toward the trail.

Suddenly the stage pulled over the rise. Matt paused. The clerk grunted, somewhat relievedly, and went back within. Matt heard him complain to a bystander, "Damn old fool! He'll kill those hosses yet!"

Dust swirled high above the careening coach. Matt's gaze pierced the haze. He stiffened with sudden alarm. Then he was running, sprinting for the stage.

Men yelled, scattered, as the carriage careened dangerously past the office. Matt came in on the left leader, flung himself at the madly rushing animal's head. His fingers gripped the bit leather. He was dragged clear of the ground. His left hand shifted. Vise-like fingers closed over the bay's nose, clamped, shutting off the animal's breathing. With remorseless strength he pulled the horse's head in toward him.

The animal slowed, stopped. The others, surging forward, nearly spilled the bay. The

stage slewed about in the dust, tipped perilously, righted itself and came to halt by Barker's Hotel.

Men crowded about, their hoarse, questioning voices filling the air. Matt swung away as others held the panting animals. His eyes were hard as he climbed up to the driver's seat.

Old Whiplash was a slumped figure, held from falling by coils of rope that bound him to the seat. He had a slug in his left arm and one over his heart. He should have been dead, but he wasn't. Yet. The old driver seemed made of rawhide.

Matt slashed him free, noting that Jeeps, the gun-guard, was missing. There was blood on Jeeps' side of the seat.

He stepped down, his mouth a hard line, and pushed through the crowd that surged about the stage. Blood oozed between his fingers as he carried Galin into the hotel lobby. He placed the dying driver in an upholstered chair, snapped an order.

Galin moved, coughed, as Matt forced whiskey down his throat. His eyes opened, blinked. "H'lo, Sheriff," he whispered. His eyes moved to the faces about him. He smiled. "Made it—huh—"

Hayden shoved through the group and bent by Galin. "Who shot you, Whiplash?"

The old driver's lips tightened. "Gallows bunch. Thet copperhead segundo Poole. Killed Jeeps. Plugged me when—I didn't stop. But—I—got through—on time—Hayden?"

Hayden's eyes met Matt's over the dying man. Dark, challenging. "Yeah, Whiplash," he said gently. "Right on time."

THE leathery driver grinned weakly. "Old Whiplash always on ti—" His head lolled back. But his eyes remained open, staring, and somehow as fierce as the unconquerable courage of the man.

Matt straightened. He met Hayden's accusing gaze with stony face. Without a word he walked out.

Feeling flared high in Cordon. Men gathered in angry groups to discuss the holdup.

Matt met his deputy, Lawton, in front of the office. The sheriff could see Hayden across the street, watching, waiting.

"Get a posse together, Bob," he clipped to the lanky young deputy. "Pick up the trail an' see what you can do."

Lawton said, "Sure, Matt." He frowned. "Ain't you ridin'?"

Matt was watching Hayden. He said, "No!" in a cold voice.

Lawton shrugged. He moved down the street toward a watching cluster of men. Matt remained by the office, waiting, until the deputy got his posse together. They pounded past him in a cloud of dust.

Hayden was a stiff figure across the street. Matt's mind echoed with the cattleman's warning. His lips curled. To hell with Hayden! I him think what he liked. He'd never know the truth.

The sheriff swung down the street. Memory of Clara Hayden came to him. A laughing, willowy girl he had first met at a shindig in Dineen's. He remembered that meeting, clearly. . . .

Coldly his mind blanked her out. He thrust aside the hotel door, scarcely seeing the men in the lobby. He went up to his room, closed the door, threw his sombrero on the bed.

It was hot. No breeze ruffled the curtains at the open window. Matt stood against the door, staring with unseeing eyes.

Finally he grunted, moved to the dresser. Methodically, his mind made up, he took his scant belongings out of drawers, began to roll them in his slicker.

A heavy Colt .45, which he took from under a blue shirt, brought flares into his eyes. His father's gun. It had the same Gallows etching in the butt as the mate his brother carried. Matt had never worn it. He had vowed he never would.

He thrust it into his slicker roll. Began tying up the bundle.

A hesitant knock halted him. He turned his head, said, "Come in," tonelessly.

The door opened and closed. Matt straightened, faced about. "Clara!" His voice shook. "Clara, what are you doin' here?"

Clara Hayden had her father's eyes and her father's ways. What she wanted she got. She wanted Matt. She came swiftly to him, gripping his arms with small white hands. "They're talking, Matt. Saying dreadful things outside. A story's spreading. About you and this outlaw, the Gallows Rider. They're whispering you're afraid!"

Matt avoided her gaze.

Her hands pulled down at his arms. "Matt! Do you hear? They're saying you're in with this killer!"

"Let 'em talk," Matt cut in coldly. "Let 'em!"

The girl's grip relaxed. Her eyes held fright in them as she sought Matt's gaze. "Matt, tell me the truth! They say you sent young Lawton alone, heading the posse after those killers. Why didn't you go? *Why, Matt?*"

The sheriff moved away, his gaze on the wall. Then he swung back, faced her, said harshly, "Mebbe they're right, Clara. Mebbe I *am* scared!"

The girl's face whitened. Her eyes clung to his face. She shook her head, slowly. "No, Matt—" And then her eyes focussed on the slicker roll. Her breath drew inward with a sharp little gasp. "You were leaving?" Her fingers tightened on his arms again. "You

were leaving without even seeing me!"

Matt nodded. It was an effort to keep his voice steady. "I'm scared, Clara—an' I'm clearin' out. You an' me—that's over!"

The girl's fingers loosened and fell away. Hayden's daughter stepped back, her face very white.

"Yes," she said. Her voice was quite steady. "It's all over, Matt. Goodbye!"

She was gone then, in a soft rustle of cloth, the closing of a door.

Chapter III

TINSTAR JAIL-BREAKER

MATT went to the window. Clara Hayden had come in a buckboard. He could see it now, tied to the rack in front of the general store. Matt watched Clara cross the street, head held very high.

He swung away impatiently and rolled a smoke with fingers that shook. Something important had just gone out of his life. It left an emptiness inside him; an emptiness he knew he could never fill. He made his way out of the room, down the stairs and through the lobby of the hotel. A few personal items were in the office of the jail. He was still mulling over the situation when he entered the office. But his decision was made.

He would run away again, like that day in Jedville. For he *was* afraid. Afraid of what he might do. And of the wan, tired face that would forever haunt him.

He ripped the star from his shirt and he was about to toss it into a corner when a vague impulse restrained him. He thrust it into his pocket.

Something inside him laughed bitterly. This was the end of Matt Trevor, lawman. He knew it. The heritage of his father was a pounding in his veins now.

Muscles corded his jaw. The thin creak of the door jerked him about. And through the veil of gray-blue smoke he saw Hugh Hayden, cold and grim.

Matt dropped the cigarette, stepped on it. His voice rasped: "Well?"

Hayden's gaze traveled over the slicker roll on the desk; pin pointed on Matt's badgeless shirt; raised coldly to Matt's bitter face. He said, "Leavin', Matt?"

"Driftin'," Matt snapped.

Hayden moved solid shoulders. "Yeah, I know. Habit of yourn?" His lips tightened. "Yo're not driftin' this time, Matt."

Matt's eyes were suddenly dangerous. "No-o-o?"

Hayden tapped his holstered weapon. "I'm thinkin' of Jefferson County!" His lips smiled, but his eyes were contemptuous. "I'm waitin' to hear yore story."

"It'll be a long wait," Matt said flatly. He stepped up close to the big cowman. "There is no story."

Hayden stepped back. The smile left his face. "I gave you yore last chance, Matt. It's yore fault." His voice raised sharply. "All right, boys!"

Matt's hands flashed to his guns and froze there. He stepped back, his eyes icy, holding himself with effort.

Men with leveled guns crowded into the room. Under their covering Hayden stepped close, lifted Matt's Colts from holsters.

"We ain't gonna make the mistake they made in Jefferson County," he clipped grimly. "I'm figgerin' it'll be best if yo're in a cell while thet Gallows guncrew is in the section!" He stepped to one side, motioned with one of Trevor's guns. "You know the way, Matt. Get goin'."

Matt's face was a mask. The last barrier to his wild nature crumbled at this turn of events. He laughed, a sound that chilled those pressing men. He walked out back, his guards closing in behind him.

THE Cordon jail was made of stone. Heavy blocks piled one upon the other. The flat, sloping roof was of split logs.

Matt paced the earthen floor as dawn rimmed the eastern sky and thin fingers of gray seeped through the lone barred window high up in his cell. The night coolness was still in the air. The town was quiet.

Matt paused under the high window. He reached up, gripped the bars, pulled himself to chin level with the stone sill. He had done this many times during the night.

The back of the jail was a littered lot. Beyond the town end, a quarter-of-a-mile away, a dark growth line marked the river. The bad country beyond was hidden in the gray light.

Matt let himself down and paced again with tigerish tread. Thoughts streamed through his head. The posse had returned last night without young Lawton. Matt had heard snatches of conversation as men talked to the jailer. The posse had lost the trail beyond the river. But the foolhardy deputy had refused to give up. He was out there now, looking for the worst bunch of killers to ever harry the Forked River settlements.

Matt didn't care. He was beyond caring. The wild strain surged within him. The cell walls seemed to hem him in, stifle him.

Rage welled up in his powerful frame. He gripped the bars of the small opening in the wooden door that faced the narrow guard room. He shook it savagely. "Downey!" he yelled. "Downey, let me out of here!" He shook the door, the red hell in him giving him superhuman strength. *"Let me out of here!"*

Downey's face appeared beyond the bars.

Behind the guard, hanging from a peg on the wall, were Matt's gun-belts. Hayden had dug the Gallows gun from his slicker roll. It was on the small table under the hanging belts. The carved figure on the butt seemed to leer at Matt.

Downey was a loose limbed, homely man. He grinned at the raging prisoner. "Keep quiet!" he admonished, gesturing with the rifle in his hands. "Want me to wrap this around yore double-crossin' neck? Hayden told us plenty about you. An' thet Colt in yore slicker roll—the Gallows gun! You was all set to blow, eh?"

The sound of fast-running hoofs came between them. Downey whirled. Horsemen were pounding past the jail. The bark of voices woke the sleepy cowtown.

Matt pressed his face against the bars, his unreasoning fury ebbing. Downey padded to the outside door, looked down the street. He glanced back, as though to reassure himself Matt's escape was impossible, and went out.

The town was rousing. Something had happened; something that was raising hell in Cordon. Matt, his knuckles white, thought he heard Hayden's voice barking orders above the din.

Horsemen pounded past. A long line of them, as though every able-bodied man in town was leaving. Matt could see them ride by.

Then Downey came back inside. Matt swiveled red-rimmed eyes to him. The guard's face was hard.

"Yore friends struck again, Matt," he said thickly. "Near killed Hayden. They must've found out about the money Hugh withdrew from the bank yestiday. Money Hayden was takin' with him this mornin' to pay for some thoroughbred hosses!" The guard moved past the table, peered down the street where the thunder of hoofs was fading.

"Damn their lousy hides!" he swore, turning back to Matt. "They're gonna find out this ain't Jefferson County. They can't steal wimmin in this section without bein' hunted to hell—"

Matt's eyes suddenly flared. "Women?" His voice choked. "You mean—"

"Yeah. Hayden's gal. Kinda sweet on you, wasn't she? Before she found out the game you was playin'!"

Matt eased himself down. Clara! Clara Hayden, somewhere in that wolves' hideout! Clara among those godless men who were born wild; who knew no law save the grim creed of gunspeed, the code of every man for himself!

His brother—his own brother—had done that. Taken her into the hills!

Something that was a low growl quivered in Matt's throat. Muscles knotted over his big frame. Things blurred before him. When they cleared he found himself rattling the door again, yelling in a voice he didn't recognize. "Downey! I got to get out! You hear, Downey. *I got to get out now!*"

The guard snarled an oath as he swung the rifle. The heavy stock smashed against Matt's fingers. "Get back, you damned cougar!" he gritted.

Matt went back. The blind rage left him almost as suddenly as it had come over him. Cold reason took control, clamping a lid on the boiling hell that surged in him. His mind began to work.

He had to get out. Someway, somehow, he had to get free, to ride into the hills. To meet his brother face to face—to kill him!

HE COULD hear Downey mumbling strangely. Hear the uneasy shuffling of the guard's feet. There was fear in the gawky man as he remembered Matt's wild face pressed against the bars.

Slowly Matt rose, crept noiselessly to the door. Downey was standing near the outside entrance. Matt stalked back to the cot. He scraped a match, smothering the sound in a low cough. His body shielded the flame from possible notice of the guard. He touched it to the blanket that lay on the cot.

It caught, slowly. The reddish flicker was hidden by a rising pall of black acrid smoke. The flames began to eat into the blanket.

Matt twisted away, pressed his powerful body against the cold wall close to the door.

Tensed, his gray eyes burning in a beard-stubbled face, he waited. His right hand lifted, hung poised, ready to move with the instant motion of a dropping hawk.

The smoke grew thick in the cell. It seeped out like a dark cloud through the barred door. Downey's muttering ceased. For a moment Matt thought his ruse had failed.

Then a white face appeared close to the bars. Downey's suspicious voice ripped into the cell. "What in hell you doin'—"

The words were choked in his throat as Matt's fingers shot through the bars and clamped about his scrawny throat. The man gagged as he was pulled close, the cold bars pressing deep into his thin, distorted face.

Matt's face loomed before his bulging eyes. The ex-sheriff's voice was flat, deadly. "Open the door, Downey, or by hell I'll choke the tongue outta you!"

Downey tried to struggle. That iron arm held him helpless as a baby against the cell door. He tried to shout, but his breath was shut off. His face was slowly purpling.

The rifle dropped from his grip. His boots smothered the sound. Downey's hand trembled as he felt in his pocket for the keys, fitted one by feel into the lock, turned it.

The bolt creaked. Matt pushed the door open with one hard shove, stepped around it

with cougarish speed, and caught the sagging guard. "This is for the smash on the fingers!" he growled, whipping a hard right to Downey's jaw.

The guard went out, cold. Quickly Matt dragged the unconscious man into the cell, stamped out the blanket fire, stepped out, locked the door.

His eyes had a deadly chill as he took down his gun-belts. He discarded the right Colt, slipping in its place the Gallows gun after making sure it was loaded and in firing order. His father's gun! With it he was going to kill his brother! The feeling was a dark, terrible thing inside him.

He paused in the doorway, slanting his gaze down the street. A rangy cayuse tied to a saloon rail a hundred feet away caught his eye. He slipped out boldly, reached the animal, untied it, whipped into the saddle and lunged down the street before he was seen.

A gent on the saloon porch yelled out and sent a shot after the escaping prisoner. Others popped out; shots crashed along the street.

Matt laughed at the close-passing lead. The strange, bitter laugh Hayden had heard up in the hotel room. It held all the wildness, the untameable spirit of the Trevor blood, that laugh that seemed to echo over the sun streaked street.

The dust settled slowly after his vanishing figure.

CHAPTER IV

LAND OF FORGOTTTEN MEN

THE bad country. It simmered under the white hot sun that rose and dipped in the sky, mocking the mote of a man who treaded a rangy cayuse under its frowning cliffs.

The impenetrable hush of the hills hung over the outlawed sheriff. Somewhere in these jumbled reaches Hayden and his posse had vanished. And somewhere was the Gallows bunch—and the foolhardy Lawton who had gone hunting the killers alone.

Late afternoon found Matt a grim figure staring at circling dots in the sky. Even as he looked they dipped, grim scavengers of death. Something frightened them; perhaps some movement in the prey they thought dead. Sent them wheeling aloft to continue their patient vigil.

"Lawton!" The name ripped from Matt's tight lips. The rangy cayuse lunged ahead at the rake of his heels.

It *was* young Lawton. A limp figure in a dry creek bottom. The blazing sun beat down on his bared head. A weary roan stood over him. The long reins were looped about the lawman's arms, as though his last instinctive thought had been to hold his horse.

Lawton was dying. A slug had gone clean through him from the back. He scarcely recognized the sheriff. He spat out the water Matt forced between purpling lips. He mumbled words. Blood choked his throat several times. He seemed to think Matt was with a posse. Twice he talked to an imaginary Hayden.

"Lost the trail . . . yesterday," he mumbled. His eyes filmed. His fingers clutched at Matt's supporting arm. "Saw 'em, last night. They had a girl—Hayden!" He stared with unseeing eyes at the mesquite-fringed bank. "Hayden—yore daughter! I followed 'em . . . north. Canyon west of Dome Peak. . . ." He twisted, and blood was bright in his mouth corners. He coughed. "Sentry up in rocks plugged me. I was ridin' back—" His fingers tightened on Matt's arm. "Matt—get 'em—"

His tortured face stiffened, then relaxed. His head lolled against Matt's chest.

The outlawed sheriff eased the lanky body. His promise was silent but deadly. They'd pay, all of them, for young Lawton.

He had no time to bury the lawman. Matt tied him securely to the roan. The animal would find its way back to town. He waited till the roan with its grisly burden plodded out of sight around a bend in the arroyo.

The rangy cayuse he had stolen snorted as he rose to saddle. Dome Peak. A beard-stubbled, grim figure, he headed north into the lengthening shadows.

* * *

A moonless night drew its blanket over the hills. In the bottleneck canyon west of Dome Peak was bustle and movement. A great fire burned, casting its flickering glow over lean men saddling restless horses. Tightening cinches. Sliding oiled rifles into saddle boots.

The Gallows bunch were preparing to leave.

In the wider reaches of the canyon Hayden's rustled cattle lowed uneasily. Closer to the narrow gap a cabin squatted in the gloom of the cliff wall. The passing of the hard-faced outlaws before the great fire threw long, wavering shadows over it.

No one noticed the prowling shadow that hugged the bare gap walls. A figure that stalked into the canyon and paused to size up those outlaws about the fire.

The longriders knew Jules was on guard at the canyon mouth. Jules had raised no outcry. They could not know that Jules was even now a trussed, gagged figure cursing the pitch dark and the lump on his throbbing head.

Matt's eyes glittered. His brother was not among the killers around the fire. His gaze shifted to the cabin. Noiselessly he faded into the dark.

Five minutes later he was hugging the cabin side farthest from the fire. Voices drib-

bled out through the unchinked wall. Muted sounds that had no meaning. Matt pressed closer. He recognized Clara's tone, then his brother's. A low mumble with a strange cough tacked to it.

The sneer that came to Matt's face was a terrible thing as he eased around to the door. It was cut in the off wall. The crackling flames barely lightened the gloom about it.

Tense, murder in his heart, he reached up for the crude latch. He didn't lift it. He jerked slightly instead, and went rigid.

The gun jammed into the small of his back was a deadly thing. The voice that breathed hot against his neck was worse. "Matt Trevor, hisself—the double-crossin' sheriff!"

Matt didn't move. He said, "I must be slippin' like hell, Poole," very evenly. "I should have smelt polecat. . . ."

The muzzle pressed hard. For a heartbeat Matt thought the wiry killer would pull trigger.

But Poole had other plans.

The gun muzzle did not relax, but a laugh crackled in Matt's ear. A clawlike hand lifted his guns from holsters. Poole said, "Step right in, Matt. I got a surprise for you!"

Icily cool, the ex-sheriff raised the latch. The door swung open. Ahead of him he saw Clara, across the room, chestnut hair a tumbled mass over her face. She was tied fast to a chair. Matt's heart pounded as he saw the bruise on her cheek. But the gun against his back held him motionless.

Her gaze lifted to him as he entered. Grew very wide and dark. She cried brokenly, "Matt—oh, Matt!"

The in-swinging door hid someone on a cot. It creaked under shifted weight. Someone coughed with blood in his throat.

Matt moved forward under pressure of Poole's gun. "Shove yore nose against the wall!" the killer snapped. He grinned as he closed the door with his foot, bent swiftly and deposited Matt's Colts in a corner by the door.

"Turn around Matt, an' take a look," he urged. His voice held a triumphant sneer.

Matt turned. His puzzled gaze went to the cot. He went suddenly rigid. His face went white; a word wrenched from his lips: "Fred!"

THE CALLOWS RIDER was slumped in a sitting position on the cot. Blood oozed steadily from a hole in his chest. His eyes were dull. His lean, mocking face was twisted; he looked as though he had aged fifty years in five minutes.

He tried to smile. "Sorry, Matt." A hint of something wild, a flare of fading fire burned in his eyes as he looked at Poole.

The girl's broken voice disturbed that shocked silence. "Your brother told me everything, Matt. I would have understood if you only had explained."

The silence closed over them. Poole was sneering, gun in hand, enjoying the shock in Matt's face.

The girl's voice came again, dull sounds in that strained silence. "He tried to stop Poole, last night, from taking me here. That—beast—shot him—from behind—"

Poole's thin voice broke in on Clara's jerky words. "It's takin' him a long time to die. But yo're gonna take longer, Matt. First yo're gonna come south with me . . . an' the gal. Yo're gonna watch me make love to yore womin!" His left hand lifted to his puffed lips. He laughed. "I said you'd pay, damn you!"

The rigidness left Matt. Clara's pale face penetrated his stunned mind, and suddenly the devil in his blood was a raging thing, checked only by a cool brain. Slowly he gathered himself, eyeing that sneering killer with the leveled gun. His voice was deliberate, strangely confident.

"Poole, you should have pulled trigger when you had that gun against my back. Now, you'll never leave this room!" Matt's great hands spread out from his sides, became curved steel hooks. *"I'm goin' to kill you, Poole!"*

Something in his voice chilled the outlaw. Then he relaxed, shrugging off the fingers of fear. He laughed contemptuously. He had five slugs in the gun in his fist. And at eight feet. . . .

Clara Hayden cried out, "Poole!" she pleaded brokenly. "Poole, I'll go with you, willingly—if you'll let him go. Poole—" Her breath caught sharply in her throat.

For Poole had slipped back a pace, murder in his beady eyes. Disregarding that broken plea, he drew back the spiked hammer.

A last desperate cry welled up in Clara Hayden's throat. "Matt!"

Then the grim, outlawed sheriff moved. In a long leap that covered the distance to the killer. He saw fear come into Poole's eyes at the last moment, and that fear probably saved his life. Poole's weapon exploded in the confines of that small room. It seemed to detonate thunderously in Matt's head while he was in mid-air. A white hot poker streaked his forehead. Blood gushed warmly down his left cheek. But the terrible vitality that was his heritage, the incredulous vitality that had let his father walk fifty paces, emptying his Colts, with a slug in his heart, flowed in Matt's big body.

Poole's face changed from snarling, crazed triumph to a mask of livid terror as his bullet failed to floor Matt. A fear-ridden cry welled to his lips, and then great hands clamped

around his throat. Poole's cry was choked short. He was lifted clear of the floor. His gun-hand threshed, jammed against Matt's side. The ex-lawman's left hand dropped down, gripped Poole's wrist as the gun roared. Lead seared Matt's leg. He wrenched with bone-crushing force. Poole's wrist snapped; the gun dropped from his fingers and thumped on the floor.

The silence pressed heavy after those shots. Fred's broken cough sounded. Then hoarse, surprised yells boomed from around the campfire. Feet pounded madly toward the outlaw cabin.

The room tilted queerly before Matt's eyes. Blood seeped into his left eye. The squirming figure in his hands ceased its spasmodic jerkings. The dead weight tipped Matt off balance. He went stumbling against the wall, his brain on fire.

MATT let the dead thing in his hands drop. As he straightened up against the wall a bent-over figure passed him. His brother! There was a wild, determined look in the Gallows outlaw's eyes, a sneer on his distorted features. He reached Matt's guns, the guns Poole had dropped in a corner by the door, stumbled back.

Blood trickled from his mouth. He loomed up before Matt, handed him a gun. His hand closed over Matt's shoulder, his voice gasped, "Give 'em hell, Matt!"

Trevor's great hand closed over the gun. What followed remained a vague blur in his mind. He saw the door burst open under the impact of bodies. Saw lean faces in the lamplight. He squeezed trigger, instinctively, and the booming of his brother's old-running gun joined it.

Those lean faces seemed to go red, melt down in the doorway. The gun in Matt's hand spat to its emptying, and he remembered throwing it savagely at the yelling figures that were scattering from that doorway of death.

As he sagged against the wall rifle volleys seemed a belated echo to the Colt shots. Through the suddenly empty doorway he saw a long line of riders emerging from the canyon gap.

He tried to straighen. He saw his brother stumble to the door, sway there, then fall out into the dark, across sprawled, unmoving bodies. It was the last time he was to see Fred alive.

Matt twisted away. He began to move toward the girl but he fell before he reached her . . . fell into a great bottomless well of darkness.

That darkness seemed to envelop him momentarily. Yet when Matt finally saw clearly again he knew he had been unconscious a long time.

The door of the cabin was open. Sunlight streamed through in a cheerful splash. He turned his bandaged head and looked up into Clara's tired, smiling features. The girl had not left his side during all that terrible night.

She called to her father, a great relief in her voice.

Booted feet thumped the floor. Matt looked up into Hayden's face. Hayden had a bandaged head, his left arm in a sling. Other men came to cluster about that cot. Grim men, whose faces held something of awe as they looked down on the ex-sheriff.

The glint of metal on his shirt caught Matt's attention. His badge! He lifted a hand that was strangely heavy and ran faltering fingers over it. He tried to speak. Clara's fingers, held gently over his mouth, hushed him.

Hayden nodded understandingly. "I pinned it back on, Matt. I'm sorry I ever made you take it off." His tone was serious. "Yore brother talked just before he died. Told us everythin'."

He shuffled a little by that cot. A quiet peace seemed to hang in the air, yet reflected in the eyes of that posse was memory of the terrible scene that greeted them in this cabin the night just passed.

"We might never have found this hideout if we hadn't heard all hell break loose here last night. We were huntin' blind near Dome Peak." Hayden laughed grimly. "We got here at the finish. Just in time to clean up what the Trevors were finishin'."

Matt Trevor's eyes asked a solemn question.

The cattleman nodded. "Poole's dead, if that's what you mean. We found my money on him!" The big cowman's eyes shifted along the cot. "You got powerful hands, Matt. I never saw a man choked so complete in all my life!"

The bitter lines smoothed from Matt Trevor's face. From the rough ceiling a patient, lined face seemed to look down at him—his mother's face—and there seemed to be a smile in her faded eyes. It eased the burning pain of his wounds, that smile, and flooded him with a peace he had never known during his life.

His fingers tightened about Clara's hands. Hayden swung away, herding the others out before him. He looked back in time to see his daughter's head go down to Matt, and he grinned as he went out and made ready to mount his pony.

His cheery whistle came back to the two in the cabin.

THE END

With a little gurgle, the oldster pulled out a heavy leather poke and set it on the floor.

ABOUT some things, Big Jack Shada was a careful man. Maybe losing his left eye when he was a kid had had something to do with this. A man with only one eye can't afford to take risks. Not with that good eye, as least.

Now with the rain peppering against his face, he stood staring at the light in old Pop Larson's cabin and going over his plans for the final time. Anyway he looked at it, killing Pop Larson for his hoard of gold seemed like a safe bet.

He patted the sagging pocket with the gun in it—not that he intended to kill the old man with that gun—and moved toward the window. The darkness didn't worry him. He knew his way about. Lately he'd been watching the claim almost every day from behind the brush along Elk Creek. Twice, when Pop had gone to town for supplies, he'd vainly searched the cabin for the old man's hidden gold. The second time had been this very day. But old Pop Larson was smart when it came to hiding that bulging leather poke that people said he had.

Shada got his good eye close to the water-splashed window and looked in. Pop sat at a square rickety table. He'd pushed back the supper dishes and was dealing himself a game of Klondike. The oldster's sixgun hung from a nail above the sagging bunk. That was the gun Shada expected to shoot Pop with. He hoped that after he got the job done, it would look like suicide. But even if it didn't, it wouldn't matter too much, not the careful way he'd planned things.

The light from the flickering lamp gleamed on the old man's hair. As he played, his whisker-rimmed lips puckered, and frown wrinkles pulled at his leathery face. Pop had only two interests in life: panning gold and playing solitaire. He did both with equal fervor. And people said there were two things he'd never do—trust a bank and cheat at Klondike.

LAST HAND

By BEN FRANK

Shada's thin lips curled. The old man, he reckoned, was two kinds of a fool: an old fool and a gold-hoarding fool. A pushover for a man like Big Jack Shada.

Shada pulled back from the window, feeling the cold rain strike at the back of his neck. He shivered a little and not altogether from the cold wetness. The shiver held him back a moment. Then he remembered his hours of careful planning and forgot the little tug of fear. His fingers found the rusty doorknob and turned it quietly. The door wasn't locked and it opened under his touch, quietly.

But old Pop Larson either heard the door open or felt the damp air from the outside. He lifted startled eyes from the cards on the table and stared up at Shada's ugly face. If he felt any fear, however, he didn't show it.

"H'lo, Jack," he said, and played another card from his hand. "Set a while and visit."

Shada closed the door, but he didn't sit down. His good right eye flitted over the room. A box cupboard, a pair of boots by the iron stove, an extra chair with a rung broken out of the back, the bunk, the table with the dishes and cards on it. Shada was never one to waste time once he'd worked out his method of attack. He pulled the gun from his pocket and centered it on the old man.

"I ain't come to visit," he said harshly. "I want your gold! An' I want it quick!"

Old Pop's leathery face lost some color then, and he drew a noisy breath into his lungs.

"Gold?" He laid down another card and turned one face up. "Whatta yuh mean, gold? I ain't got no gold."

Shada laughed shortly. He'd expected this, but he wasn't going to have any foolishness. Not Big Jack Shada.

"Everybody knows you got gold," he said. "I can name a dozen people who've seen that poke you've got crammed with gold. For a couple of weeks I've been watchin' you pan it out." His voice hardened. "Let's don't do no stallin'. I know what I want an' I'm gonna get it!"

Pop licked the end of his thumb and played another card. He was breathing fast, and a quick pulse ticked away in front of his left sun-burned ear. He was scared, Shada knew, and that sure was the way he wanted him.

"Suppose I don't give it to yuh," the oldster wheezed.

"That," Shada said tightly, "ain't even worth considerin'. You're gonna give it to me. Where you got it hid?"

Pop played another card, but his fingers were shaking so that he had trouble laying it on the right row of cards.

"I'd be a fool to tell yuh," he said. "As long as yuh don't know where it is, yuh won't kill me. As soon as I tell yuh, yo'll—"

Inwardly Shada was pleased with himself. Pop was saying exactly what he'd expected him to say, and he had the answer ready for the old man.

"You got it all doped out wrong, Pop," he said smoothly. "If you tell me where your gold is, I won't hurt you.

When the blue chips were down in the pay-off pot that howling night on Elk Creek, gold-mad John Shada found that one Black Jack tops even the undertaker's aces and eights!

"An' if I don't tell yuh where my gold is?"

"That's when it'll get tough for you," Shada declared. "First I'll put a bullet through one of your legs. If that don't loosen your tongue, I'll try the other leg. Then I'll put a hole through your bread-basket. A man can live a long time that way, but it ain't any fun. Then—"

"Yo're a liar!" Pop panted. "Yo'll never let me go. Yuh wouldn't run the chance!"

SHADA stiffened. Sure, he was lying to the old man, but he hadn't expected the oldster to doubt him like this. He lifted the gun.

"Maybe I'll start with your left arm instead of a leg," he said flatly. "Yeah, guess I will."

He pulled back the hammer and took careful aim. His thin lips curled, and his one good eye gleamed. Slowly his finger tightened.

"Reckon this'll stop your solitaire playin', Pop," he went on. "They say a bullet in the elbow is pretty bad. Sort of—"

"All right," the old man husked. "I'll get my gold fer yuh. I'd rather be killed quick than by inches."

He laid down the few cards in his hand and shoved to his feet.

"Knowed somebody'd been foolin' around my claim lately," he mumbled. "Oughta knowed it was yuh. Never did like yore looks. Eyes set too close, an'—"

"Shut up!" Shada rasped. "You can do your talkin' later."

"I'll never do no talkin' later," the old man muttered. "There won't be no later fer me. I know a killer when—"

"Look," Shada tried again. "I ain't gonna hurt you if you get me that gold quick. But if you keep on stallin'—"

"All right, all right," the old man wheezed. "So yuh ain't gonna hurt me. So the sun ain't gonna shine no more. So—"

Shada lifted the gun. "I'm tired of your windin'!" he barked. "Here goes your left arm!"

"Wait!" Pop panted. "I'll get it."

He hobbled to the bunk and shoved it away from the wall. He got down on his skinny knees and pried up a length of floor board. Shada had looked under that bunk, but he'd never found that loose board. He reckoned the nail heads in it had fooled him.

Pop sighed and glanced up at the sixgun hanging above his head. Shada tensed, waiting for the oldster to make a grab for the gun. He didn't.

He reached into the hole under the floor, his gray face turning sideways to Shada. Sweat glistened on his furrowed cheeks.

"Yuh shore yuh ain't gonna kill me?" he panted.

"Hell no!" Shada lied. "Hurry!"

With a little gurgle, the oldster pulled out a heavy leather poke and set it on the floor.

"Every cent I got," he muttered.

Shada licked his dry lips. The poke was larger than he'd expected. He was rich, for a time, at least.

The old man loosened the draw string, reached into the poke and brought out a handful of gleaming yellow. Slowly he let the gold trickle back into the bag.

"Every cent—" he began.

Shada had lifted Pop's old sixgun from the nail. He shook it free of the worn holster and thumbed back the hammer.

Pop caught the movement out of the corner of his eye. He let out a little screech and started to his feet. He didn't quite make it. The big six touched the side of his head and roared. The old man sank back to the floor without a sound.

Shada dropped the gun beside the old man's outstretched hand. The lamp flickered on, and the rain pelted against the window. The smoke from the blast curled upward in blue, transparent ropes. Everything was suddenly very quiet and peaceful in the little cabin.

The killer stood looking down at the dead man, feeling nothing except relief that the job was done, that the gold was his. For a time, he'd thought that the old man might be stubborn, that the job might become messy. He was glad that it hadn't. Besides, the way things worked out only proved the value of his careful planning.

He picked up the poke and weighed it in his hands. The heaviness of it made his heart pound. It made him want to rush out into the night and head for his own cabin. But he was a careful man. He dumped the gold into his own leather bag which he'd brought along for the purpose. Then stuffed the old man's poke into the stove and watched it turn to ashes. After this he carefully replaced the board and pulled one end of the cot over it.

Shada had made it a point to become well acquainted with Sheriff McKay in Elk City. His personal opinion of the sheriff's ability was low. Shada had an idea that the sheriff would call old Pop's death suicide. Anyway, whatever he called it, there was nothing here that would point to Jack Shada. And the killer had already figured out how to account for the gold. He'd plant a little of it in his own worthless claim and let people see him panning it out. The word would soon spread that he'd struck it rich. Then it would be safe to start cashing in on Pop's gold.

His thin lips curled into a grin. He'd thought of everything. He was a careful man.

He dropped the poke into his pocket and slipped out into the rain. Once he glanced back. The light in the old man's cabin gleamed dully through the rain. Rain that would wash out any track that he had made. . . .

Two hours later he was in his own shack, five miles farther up Elk Creek. He put the poke under his straw mattress and climbed into bed. Tomorrow morning, he'd salt his claim. He fell asleep with the music of the rain on the roof drumming in his ears.

IT WAS close to noon of the next day when Big Jack Shada heard a horse's iron-shod hoofs on the rocky Elk Creek Trail. Unhurriedly he left the shade of a scrub pine where he'd been lying. A grin spread across his face. A visitor was coming. Now to do a little gold panning.

Yawning widely, he moved down to the water's edge. A woodpecker drummed away on a distant dead tree. High above in the blue sky, a buzzard circled, and the clear cold water at Shada's boot tips gurgled happily. It was a fine day after yesterday's rain. The big man squatted on his knees and began to swish the water and gravel around in his pan. The sun caught on a yellow particle in the gravel, and his grin widened.

"Howdy, Shada," a voice drawled from the trail's end.

Just for a moment, Shada felt himself tense. The voice belonged to Sheriff McKay. He'd expected a visitor to be one of the miners from down-stream, not the sheriff from Elk City.

He set the pan down carefully, turned slowly

and got to his feet. He managed a little grin.

McKay sat on his white horse, leaning forward in the saddle, his lean face grim under his black Stetson.

"Doin' any good?" he asked.

Shada had downed the uneasy feeling. He picked a fleck of gold out of the pan and held it up for the sheriff to see.

"Whatta you think, Sheriff?"

McKay squinted and sent a stream of tobacco juice against the sun-bleached rocks.

"Looks like gold," he observed.

Shada nodded.

"It is gold. An' you'd be surprised how much there is. 'Course I don't want this to get around, Sheriff, but I've really struck it rich."

The sheriff slid from the saddle. He was an inch taller than Jack Shada and as solid as a slab of granite. Carelessly he picked up the pan, shook it and stared at the gleaming yellow mixed with the brown gravel.

"Wouldn't 'a' believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes," he said. "Looks mighty good."

"Plenty good," Shada said.

Inwardly he gloated. There wasn't anyone he would rather have had come along than Sheriff McKay. Now he'd saddle up his pinto and ride back to town with McKay and turn the gold into cash. With McKay to back up his story of striking it rich, no one would question his right to the gold.

Grinning, he pulled the heavy poke out of his pocket. "This'll give you some idea of how good it is," he said. "Just lift this."

The sheriff hefted the poke and whistled. "Not bad," he said.

He started to hand the poke back, changed his mind and put the heavy leather bag into his left hand. "Care if I look at it?" he asked.

Shada shrugged. He didn't care. Gold was gold any place you found it.

The sheriff emptied the pan and poured the gold into it. Shada's eyes gleamed. When you spread the gold out over the bottom of the pan, you really saw how much there was. He reckoned he'd be pulling his stakes as soon as he'd picked up what gold he'd carefully planted in the narrow strip of gravel. He'd head for some big town and have him a little fun. He'd—

The sheriff picked up something out of the pan. Something that wasn't gold. It was a corner torn from a playing card. With a quick movement of his brown hands, he drew a playing card from his pocket and fitted the torn piece to the corner.

Shada felt his blood begin to pound through his head. He remembered old Pop Larson playing Klondike. He remembered how the old man had opened his poke and reached down into it, as if feeling his gold for the last time. He knew now that the old man had been burying that torn-off corner of the card in the gold. All the killer's caution suddenly left him. With a sharp curse, he started for the gun in his pocket.

The two pieces of card fluttered from the sheriff's brown fingers, and his hand filled with a gun.

"Watch it, Shada!" he clipped. "I'm arrestin' you for the murder of Pop Larson! I reckon it won't take much investigation to show that you salted your claim with a little of Pop's gold. I reckon—"

Shada felt a ball of ice forming in the pit of his stomach. He looked wildly about for a way out of this. There wasn't any. A wave of weakness hit him, and he sank back on his heels.

"How'd you know it was me?" he husked.

"Pop was in to see me yesterday," McKay explained. "He said somebody had been snoopin' around his claim. I promised I'd come out this mornin' to have a look around. Found him dead. Saw he'd been playin' Klondike. The game was about half finished. Couldn't see him shootin' himself in the middle of a game. Not Pop."

The sheriff grinned and picked up the torn card. It was the Jack of Spades.

"Everybody knows," he went on, "that Pop would no more think of cheatin' at solitaire than he'd think of trustin' his gold to a bank. But he'd cheated with this card. He'd put it on a black Queen instead of a red Queen. And this Jack was the only card with a corner missin'. Do you begin to understand, Shada?"

Jack Shada's mind was in a whirl. He couldn't think. A trickle of sweat got into his good right eye, making it blur and smart. He shook his head.

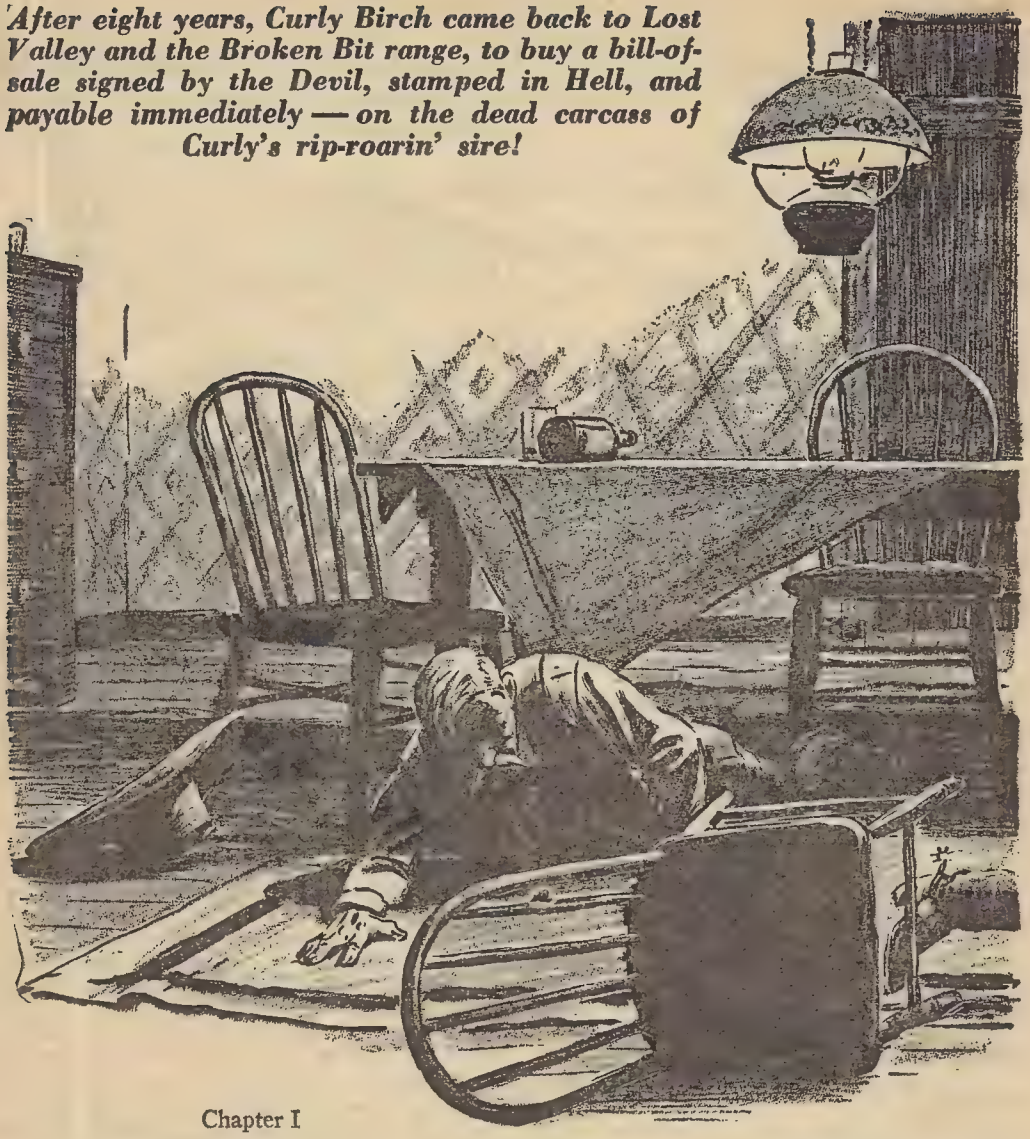
Sheriff McKay's eyes were gleaming pinpoints of disgust.

"I asked myself," he said, "why would Pop cheat this one time—his last game? He must have had a mighty good reason to mis-place that Jack. Then it hit me. There was just one man by the name of Jack livin' in these parts who had only one good right eye like the Jack of Spades has. An' that man is you! An' now that I've found the torn corner of that card mixed in with the gold, I know—"

Shada didn't hear any more. A wave of sickness had come over him. Justice was quick and sure in Elk City, he remembered, and the rope they used was strong.

His sickness turned to terror, and he forgot that he was a careful man. He went for the gun in his pocket. The roar of Sheriff McKay's big sixgun came to Jack Shada as if from a great distance just before he fell forward on his shattered face.

After eight years, Curly Birch came back to Lost Valley and the Broken Bit range, to buy a bill-of-sale signed by the Devil, stamped in Hell, and payable immediately — on the dead carcass of Curly's rip-roarin' sire!



Chapter I

PRODIGAL OF BROKEN BIT

WHEN Curly Birch came down the last switchback turn on the War Pass trail, the late afternoon sun was sinking toward the distant, serrated peaks, staining the end of day with copper-colored light. The first glimpse he had of this prairie and mountain wilderness reminded him again, as he forked his scarred long horse, that this remote corner of the universe held everything a man could want in Paradise.

Nightfall was still an hour or more away, yet already the land was turning into a vast lake of shadow, its canyons and low-lying meadows slowly growing soft and shapeless under tranquil layers of soft gray mist.

Northward two or three miles, and seen through the tops of tall-standing spruce and pine, sat the town of War Pass; and beyond was the divide that formed a natural gateway into Lost Valley, home range of the Birch clan for these fifty years. Deep in that valley of timber-stippled hills and grassland, was Broken Bit, the house and barns and pole corrals which Curly had not seen in eight long years.

The tireless beat of his roan's hoofs went on, dropping steadily toward the foot of the grade. He felt the surge of happiness a man feels when he is coming home from wandering afar. It was like a singing inside of him, for

THE RANCH THAT GOD FORGOT

By ROD PATTERSON

He hurled himself at Yokum's legs, tackling him.

he realized anew that he was, and would always be, a part of this land into which he was riding now; and he welcomed the reunion with Big John, his father, welcomed it despite the fact that they had parted with rancor and bitterness so long ago.

He wondered how the old man looked. Time, he knew, worked its small changes, and he supposed Big John had changed, at least in appearance. He, himself, had not changed much, he felt. He still loved peace and independence, but the years away from home had increased his sense of tolerance for the weaknesses of men, had also sharpened his abhorrence of violence in any form. Though he wore a cartridge belt and gun, he had never used it on his fellow man, had resolved he never would.

When Curly's mother was living, Big John had treated him normally enough. The boss of Broken Bit had settled his own arguments, conducted his own fights in the troublesome business of running a cattle ranch in times when rivalry was keen. But when Cora Birch had died, nine years ago, a rift had come between father and son, for Big John, in his loneliness, had tried to force aggressiveness into Curly's character, and Curly had naturally rebelled, had finally turned his back on the ranch and home he loved.

But now the past had buried its bitterness, had laid its ghosts of imaginary wrongs. He felt he was returning a richer man, a wiser one; richer in experience, in forbearance, wiser in his judgment of others. He and Big John would start again, forgetting the past; and this he knew was meant to be; nothing could make it otherwise.

THE town of War Pass had not altered much since he had seen it last. Entering the settlement from the southeast trail, he saw

how it sat on the crest of its ridge, facing the divide and the lifting somber peaks that hemmed Lost Valley in. There was the double row of wooden buildings, some false-fronted and paintless, with the dark green of the pines encircling on all sides.

Beyond the town stood the pass, and through the cleft the canyon trail cut deep and winding into the Muleshoes, the shadows of which lay hard upon the wide main street. Now Curly came into that dusty, rutted street, jogging briskly, passing between shops and dwellings whose lights already had begun to bloom through open doorways and windows coated with thick cobwebby dust.

On the four corners of the central square stood a harness shop, a hotel, and two saloons diagonally facing each other. One was the Idle Hour; the other's faded sign said, PARNELL'S PRIDE.

There was an open lot beyond the Idle Hour half filled with saddle horses standing at a long pine rail. Ranch rigs were drawn up at its edges, and a few big Mitchells with high, hoop-tilted tops. Curly rode into this lot through the day's fast-fading light, racked his roan and returned to the street, entering the Idle Hour.

The saloon was crowded, noisy with man-talk and clinking glasses. Tall, blue-eyed, lean, Curly squeezed into a place against the raw wood bar and bought a drink, searching the room for a familiar face, but finding none.

A solid-shouldered man of indeterminate age stood next to him, and as he jostled this man faintly, the fellow turned a surly, flatly scowling face and said, "Who you shovin', bub?"

Curly smiled, murmuring his apology. The man had a pair of hard gray eyes creased at the corners from staring against the mountain sun, and a mouth that was too small, too tight, plainly given to sullenness rather than affability. The man turned back to the bar and finished off his drink, afterward calling the bland-faced bartender, saying, "Gimme three bottles of that red-eye, Pete." He nodded his head—which was covered with a soiled white Stetson hat—toward the array of labels on the back-bar.

The barkeep set the dusty bottles on the bar and wiped them with his towel, commenting in a mild and friendly voice. "Big John's thirst is gettin' big enough to drink me dry. That's the fifth quart of bust-head in two days. Peewee Gates was down fer some last Thursday night."

"Mebbe," the buyer of the liquor said, "it's Big John's business how much he drinks."

"Mebbe," the barkeep agreed, grinning at the rebuke. "And mebbe it's a helluva note, too. What he needs is a sawbones and some medicine that don't come out of rot-gut bottles!"

"You want to doctor him?" the man on the pleasure side of the bar inquired with heavy irony.

"Hell, no, Casheen!" the bartender said. "I ain't no blasted pill-roller and wouldn't wanta be!"

"Well, keep your lip buttoned then," Casheen warned shortly.

Caught in the grip of his surprise at Casheen's words, and by the bartender's mention of Big John and his being sick, Curly touched Casheen on the shoulder. "Scuse me, friend, but was you speakin' about Big John Birch of Broken Bit?" he asked in a faintly worried tone.

The thick-shouldered Casheen reared back from the bar, and the skirt of his coat fell open to reveal the gun-belt and low-tied double-action Colt. His eyes and mouth went flat as though he tasted something sour.

"Who wants to know?" he demanded with an edge of truculence, blinking his hard eyes into Curly's blue ones.

"A friend of Big John's," Curly furnished, unabashed. "I jest rode in to look him up."

Suspicion built up swiftly on the other's saddle-colored face. "Big John," he said harshly, "ain't got no friends from out of town. And don't be forgettin' what I said."

There was a silence here. Casheen was stuffing the bottles into his pockets, bulging out his coat above each hip. Men in the line-up turned to stare with open curiosity at the two men who faced each other, one scowlingly, the other with the smallest of smiles along his mouth.

"I won't forget," Curly finally said, and now the smile was gone.

Casheen glared a moment longer, then pushed past Curly and walked out through the swinging doors and was swallowed by the night.

The barkeep came back and leaned toward Curly, stating in a careful drawl, "That's Tip Casheen, foreman at Broken Bit. He gives me the fantods every time he comes to town."

Gravity was molding Curly's lean, good-natured face. "What's he got to be so damn' stuck up about?" he asked in a puzzled voice. Then, direct with his next words: "Is Big John sick? I heard you indicate he was."

The small noises in the saloon continued now. The barkeep frowned and said, bending over the bar a bit, "Wish I knowed fer sure what goes on up there at Broken Bit. We hardly ever see Big John nowadays. Last time he drove to town with Casheen and that young woman that keeps house fer John, the old man didn't have a howdy fer anyone at all—acted plumb like his wits was pied or he jest didn't dass't to open up his mouth!"

"Didn't dare?" Curly repeated in a troubled tone. He thought about the barkeep's reference

to a girl, then, with a start, remembered Letty Sloan. Why, yes, Letty had been a cousin, five or six times removed, whom his father had taken in when her own parents had orphaned her some ten years or more ago. Curly had never paid her much attention in those days, and now he thought of her as an awkward, pig-tailed little girl with frightened eyes and a stammering way of talk. She'd been about fifteen when he left home. Why, Letty was a big girl now—a woman, even!

Chapter II

AMBUSH!

THE bartender was answering Curly's worried question. "Big John's aged, and the spread ain't what it uster be. This Tip Casheen went to work up there about a year ago with his own crew he brung from over Utah way. There's seven-eight rough-heads in it now and not one hombre with a honest eye!" He squinted hard at Curly suddenly. "Say, who in time *are* you?"

Curly said with a reserve in his voice, "They call me Slim. I used to ride for Big John Birch."

The barkeep wiped the bar a few times, then finished with his ominous-sounding words: "Since Casheen's run the ranch there ain't a head of beef been sold. They hold it all in them upland pastures. Fer what, I'd give a lot to know!"

"Me, too," said Curly. "Thanks for tellin' me all you have," he added quietly, then turned and left the Idle Hour.

He was starting down the gallery steps when the bartender came through the batwings behind him, calling, "Jest a minute, friend."

Curly turned, giving the man a laconic, "Yeah?"

"I fergot to mention," the other said in a low and confidential tone from the doors, "Miss Sloan's in town with Casheen now. And something else—Judge Yocum's up at the ranch tonight. He come in on the Chalk Springs Stage this afternoon. There's some kind of a pow-wow goin' on at Broken Bit."

"Did you say 'Yocum'?" Curly asked with a quickening of interest in his steady eyes.

"Lawyer fella with a black bag and big seegar. He went up with Peewee Gates—that's Casheen's pard—about four o'clock. And Peewee came back again with another man. He's in town with Casheen and the girl right now."

"Yocum a friend of Big John's?" Curly asked casually.

"Friend, hell! He's a shyster—a damned blackleg I wouldn't leave stand at my bar if his tongue was hangin' out like a blacksmith's apron!"

Curly thanked the man again and let himself down to the boardwalk, troubled in every thought. He stood a moment, scanning the street, seeing its desultory stir of traffic: men going and coming out of the hotel dining room across the way, others entering and leaving Parnell's Pride on the yonder corner. A ranch rig jounced up the street and left town by the timber trail to the south.

A tall, loose-jointed man came out of the lot where Curly had left his horse and moved toward the Idle Hour, coming slowly, putting his boots down carefully on the walk. Reaching Curly, he stared out from under the brim of his big hat, eyes bleak in a grim, sun-blackened face. Curly heard him say, "Git your hoss, pilgrim, and hit the breeze. Don't make trouble fer yourself."

Curly made his guess about this man's identity. It could be Peewee Gates sent here by Tip Casheen to warn him out of town. The tall man slid off into the deeper shadows down the street. Curly pulled his shoulders up and headed out across the square, toward the Pride. He was half way there when a movement on the gallery of the general store attracted him; he saw a girl come through the screen doors, her arms filled with packages.

Impulse took him toward her, and he reached the plank walk as she came down the steps and stopped, eyeing him above the topmost bundle in her arms. The light from other shops on the square was upon her, and, as she lowered her load a bit, Curly saw the roundness and fairness of her face, the lustrous shadowy quality of her hair, the steady brownness of her eyes.

Curly took off his faded hat and greeted her in the politest of tones: "Evenin', Miss Sloan. C'n I lend you a hand to your rig?"

Letty Sloan drew back in momentary caution, then smiled a little nervously. She was beautiful, Curly saw, and he laughed softly at thought of her gawkiness of a few years back. She said, "I don't think I remember you, but—"

"I'm Slim," he said easily. "Used to ride for Big John Birch one time."

"You look familiar," she said hesitantly, "and you spoke my name. All right—"

He reached out and relieved her of the heaviest bundles she held, saying in his soft, slow drawl, "I'm ridin' up to Broken Bit tonight. Mind if I go along with you?"

"My rig's in the lot yonder," she started to say, then stopped, alarm tightening her face. "Oh, no," she gasped, "you can't go to Broken Bit! I—you—they don't want strangers there!"

"I been honin' to see Big John," he murmured with a reassuring grin. "And I ain't afraid of Tip Casheen—not so's you'd notice it."

They faced each other, Curly still grinning, the girl with something close to horror on her face. "We—aren't hiring men," she breathed in sudden urgency. "You'd only waste your time—"

"That's what I got the mostest of," he answered. "What seems to be the matter with Big John? I been hearin' he's plenty sick."

She blanched at the last part of what he said, nearly dropping her remaining bundles. "Are you the *law*?" It was said so fearfully, so harshly, that it startled him.

"No, ma'am!" He spoke with a hard emphasis on each word. "I'm jest a friend, is all."

She moved closer to him, whispering in a hoarse tone, "You mustn't even try to get to Broken Bit. It's—too dangerous!"

His expression darkened and he said, "I've come a thousand miles to see Big John. Reckon I'll keep on till the end of the trail."

"But I'm here with Tip Casheen," she cut in frantically. "And Peewee Gates is with us, too. And Art Mozeman—"

The steady thud of boots on the wooden walk reached Curly's ears. Letty heard it, too, and swung her gaze toward the sound, in the direction of the Pride. And then she gasped, "It's Peewee Gates! You'd better go!"

CURLY handed her bundles back and turned to face the sound of pacing feet. He had his back to Letty now, sheltering her body with his own, and seeing the tall man who had warned him to leave town. Gates was marching up along the walk, his long arms swinging like loose poles beside him, his sullen jaw at an angry set.

Curly waited until he was a dozen yards away, and then he sent his challenge across the gap. "That's far enough!"

Stopped suddenly in his tracks, Gates struck a belligerent pose and threw his voice at Curly angrily, "Leave that gal be, stranger! She belongs to Broken Bit!"

"Move on," Curly said, a threatening gentleness in his tone. "Go back the way you came—and fast!" His right hand drifted slowly toward his holstered gun, then straightened down against his leg.

Gates saw the move, and did not have the guts to call it for a bluff. He swore under his breath and pivoted sharply, going back toward the Pride with great, long-reaching strides.

Letty cried, "He's gone for help—for Tip Casheen and Art!"

Curly looked at her quickly. "Can you manage those bundles to your rig? I'll meet you there in twenty minutes."

She started to protest, to plead, but he shook his head stubbornly. He pushed her a pace, not roughly, but firmly; and then she gave him one swift begging glance and hurried away from him, her trim boot-heels making a quiet tattoo along the planks toward the vacant lot.

She had vanished into the shadows, and Curly had dropped back to the shadows in the mouth of the alleyway beside the store when a pair of men came through the swing doors of the Pride. They stared toward him and then ducked back inside. Peewee Gates had entered a moment before, and now he came out again, accompanied by Tip Casheen.

Somewhere nearby a harsh voice yipped, "Gunfight!" That one loud and ominous word, and nothing more.

Isolated groups of men along the street broke up abruptly, some fading back into the town's dark spots, others walking off under the street lamps with pretended nonchalance. Curly had his moment of indecision. If he stayed here he would have to eat crow before Casheen and Gates or shoot it out with them. Unless . . .

Casheen and Gates were on the street and coming along the walk, not hurrying, but with a kind of calculated, measured tread. They presently spread apart, Casheen hitting the dust and kicking it up in little spurts, Gates drumming the boards with his stiff-legged pace.

Curly made up his mind. He drew his gun and fired, all in one swift move, and he saw both men break farther apart, then go into a huddled crouch, the glint of gun-iron in their hands. But Curly had fired above their heads and now he chocked his pistol back, and retreated into the mouth of the alleyway.

At the same moment Curly lifted his gaze and saw the man in the window of the Pride's corner second-story room. This man had both of his elbows on the window sill, his face hidden as he snuggled it against the stock of a rifle and took aim.

Curly jerked around and ran back into the alleyway, hearing the crack of that rifle rocket out across the flat roofs of the town. Its echo came back to him as he hit the rear of the building and cut to the left, running bent over, springing over a low fence and into the lot where the saddle horses and rigs were motionless blocks of shadow in the dark.

Halted near the fence, he held his breath, listening, keening the yard for movement but seeing not even the slightest stir. He waited the moments out, hearing the faint yells of men, then suddenly the beat of running boots coming toward him through the lot from the yonder street.

A man rushed by him not three yards away, and a horse wickered shrilly which started a whole chorus of whinnies in the lot. Then voices from the rear of the enclosure came to him—one a man's, the other belonging unmistakably to Letty Sloan.

Curly heard her gasped out words, ". . . why, no, Tip! I've seen no one! Don't, you're hurting me!"

Casheen's voice came next, a grinding undertone. "I'll kill that nosey tramp when I meet up with him! Move over, I'm gettin' in!"

Curly took this as his cue. He pulled his gun and traveled silently along the hitch rail past the heads of a dozen saddle mounts. Letty's two-bronc buckboard appeared in front of him; he saw Casheen's white hat in the gloom, realized the man was untying the broncs from the rail.

When Casheen came back to climb into the seat, Curly slid noiselessly out of the shadows, the barrel of his gun upraised. Before Casheen knew what happened that gun barrel caught him behind the ear, a dull and sodden strike of steel on bone. Casheen went down as though a rope had cut his legs from under him. His big white hat fell off as he hit the dust, and Curly bent and scooped it up, facing the girl on the buckboard's seat with a quiet, "All right, we go."

Chapter III

HOMECOMING—TO HELL!

HE WAS next to her and had the reins, was turning the team toward the street. Something occurred to him, a thought that momentarily solved a worry he had. He removed his own hat and clapped Casheen's flashier one on his head, lowering the brim above his eyes, hunching his shoulders down against the back of the seat.

"What are you going to do?" Letty queried shakily, her hand on his rigid arm. "You can't—you wouldn't dare—"

"Take it easy," he said, clucking his tongue to the broncs. "Nuthin' to get poked up about."

"But you'll never get past Casheen's guards in the pass!" she argued tensely, fearfully. "They'd kill you!"

"Not," he murmured, "if they think I'm Tip Casheen."

She abandoned arguing with a sigh of desperation, subsiding limply on the seat. And now Curly had another troubled thought: perhaps Big John might spurn his help. After all, what assurance was there that his father had not grown more bitter, more unforgiving, with the passing years? And wasn't it entirely possible that what was being trumped up at Broken Bit might actually have Big John's sanction, if not his outright cooperation?

Stranger things had happened than that an old man could suddenly sicken of old friends, of the straightforward path he had always ridden on. And yet, Curly couldn't help but think, this Tip Casheen was not the type of man his father would willingly take up with—not in a business deal, at any rate.

Leaving the unconscious Casheen in the lot, wearing Casheen's white Stetson, crouching low on the buckboard's seat beside the frightened girl, Curly trotted the broncs out of the darkness and into the half-light of the street. He saw nothing to alarm or warn him, and flicked the whip at the team, sending it northward toward the pass, leaving the silence of the town behind.

Presently, Letty said, "What about your horse?"

He grinned around at her. "They'll find it and wonder if I ain't still holed up back there. That'll give me some of the time I need, and I'll come back after my roan."

"You must be crazy, or a fool!" she said incredulously.

"Maybe," he agreed, "I'm both."

The broncs let their hoofs fly over the dusty trail toward the divide which showed its gap against the stars, a mile or two ahead. Curly handled the lines with an expert casualness, though now his innermost thoughts became less calm. Ironically he had left Broken Bit eight years ago to look for peace and a way of life that had been in conflict with his father's apparent code. Now he was returning to Broken Bit, to mystery, to danger, to battle possibly for the very things he had once hated most. But he closed his mind to doubt and uncertainty. If this was to be his night in Hell, he would see it through; for one fact, if nothing else, was clear to him: his father was in trouble and might be needing help.

For the next few minutes after they left War Pass, Letty kept turning her head to watch the trail that sloped away into the night in back of them. Curly made no further attempt to soothe her fears, but finally asked, "You say Casheen's got men posted in the pass?"

"At the Keyhole—at the valley end," she said. "They're always there—night and day—with orders to shoot if anyone breaks through."

"You wanta tell me now what's goin' on at Broken Bit?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said in the same tense tone, still watching their backtrail worriedly. "Big John's been drinking heavily for the past six months. He's not the same man. His mind wanders and he seems afraid of Tip Casheen and those other men."

"What about the cattle?" Curly inquired, scanning the trail ahead that dipped and rolled ahead of the buckboard's pole.

Letty shook her head, said dismally, "Tip holds the herd in the north meadows."

"Ain't you afraid to stay alone? With all those men around, I mean?"

"They never bother me," she told him. "And they never let me talk to Uncle John alone."

Suddenly they were in the mouth of the canyon; the blackness was thicker here; the steady drumming of the broncs' hoofs and the clatter of wheels was louder and echoed between the hemming rocky walls.

They were silent now, and presently Curly said, "Change places, Letty, and you can drive. When they stop us you can say it's Tip Casheen, that he got drunk in town."

She obeyed without a word, Curly rising while she slid into his half of the seat and took the lines he gave to her. Thereafter he pulled the brim of Casheen's hat down over his eyes, slumping slackly lower on the seat.

Halfway up the canyon, with a hundred yards still to go before reaching the Keyhole and the rolling hills of the valley beyond it, Curly saw the winking eye of a campfire through the high pine trunks ahead.

Then they both heard the on-rushing beat of horses' hoofs mingle with the thudding of the broncs' shod feet. The canyon walls began to drop down toward the yonder opening, a cleft which showed black distances filled with stars and the thin crescent of a rising moon.

Two riders came out of the shadows in front of the buckboard, and a voice called, "Halt!"

THE girl pulled back on the lines with a sharp-drawn breath that made a tiny whistling sound between her lips. The buckboard and broncs stood motionless in the center of the canyon trail. There was a rider crosswise before the broncs, a rider moving up beside the rig. Curly let his chin sag down against his chest, Casheen's white hat pitched down above his eyes.

The rider next to the rig leaned out of the saddle, peering hard. "Who's that? Casheen?"

There was a brief silence. The girl broke it in an amazingly steady voice. "He's drunk. Don't wake him up."

The rider edged his horse in close to the rig's front wheel, still peering, still hesitating. Curly heard the rider out in front say, "Where's Mozeman? Where's Peewee?"

"They're coming later," Letty said in the same slow, steady tone. "Please let me pass."

The rider up ahead pulled his horse off to one side. "Go ahead, ma'am," he said, then laughed harshly, insolently. "And you better tuck the boss in tight when you git him home."

The girl started the broncs with a jerk; the buckboard whipped onward, presently clearing the canyon and clattering over open, level ground. Finally Curly raised his head, murmuring, "Good girl."

He felt her sag against him on the seat. "I—was scared," she said.

Curly allowed her to go on driving the team. "I can tell you something now. I'm Curly, Big John's son. Remember me?"

If he had expected her to be surprised, he was disappointed. He saw her nod and heard her say calmly, "I remembered back there in the pass before they stopped us. It was your voice. Your looks have changed."

"I knew you right away."

"But why did you wait to tell me?"

"No point in makin' you worry any more. Besides, Casheen might've got it out of you in town."

She said a strange thing then, "Your father may not remember you. You've got to be prepared for that—for anything."

He didn't reply right off, but thought about it for a while. His mind grew more disturbed as the moments passed; there was a sensation like crawling along his spine that was new to him who had never consciously known fear before.

Lights flickered far ahead beyond the encroaching hills. "That's Broken Bit," Letty stated, the tightening of worry in her tone. "They won't be glad that you're coming home."

The trail came down off a kind of bench, passed through a short belt of timber and came, finally, to a stretch of *vega*, at the far side of which, backed up against a rising slope, stood the home ranch and its huddle of out-buildings and corrals.

Curly said, "Pull up, Letty," and threw a knee over the seat rail. "I'll finish it on shank's mare."

She reined in the broncs. "But—"

"No call makin' it any worse for you," he told her quietly. "See you later at the house. Just tell 'em Casheen stayed behind."

Before she could protest, or plead, he swung off into the darkness beside the trail. Afterward, he heard the buckboard move off, the broncs at a run. Now he made a considerable circle, reaching the ranch yard finally at a point near the pole corrals.

There were lights in the many-windowed house, and as he approached it he saw a door come open and men move quickly through it and into the yard. He waited a while, wondering where those men had gone. Finally he went on toward the house from the eastward side. The length of the dining room and the kitchen was before him, with only a light shining through the kitchen door and one window.

Someone was sitting on the top step of the kitchen gallery, and then he halted again, realizing it was Letty Sloan. He said softly, "Letty!" and looked sharply around the shadowed yard to see what effect the sound of his voice might have.

The girl sat silent, her head bowed, shoul-

ders cupped forward. A shadow broke from the corner of the nearby bunkhouse, stepping into the kitchen's outthrown light; and a man came at once out of the darkness on Curly's right. He was cross-ripped, and knew it. The first man said, "Who's that?"

"Curly Birch," said Curly in a steady voice.

Letty Sloan looked up as he spoke this time, but he could not see her expression though something told him she had been weeping recently. He heard boots slap toward him over the rough ground, but stood stone-still, eyeing the tall man who had come from the bunkhouse. This man now advanced on him, a gun in his hand and held hip-high in front of him. "Unbuckle your belt and leave it fall," the man ordered, stopping a yard or two away.

Curly obeyed without a word. Then he moved toward the gallery. The tall man sidestepped and blocked his way. "Where you goin', fella?"

Curly stared into a pair of greenish eyes and a sallow, angled face. "I'm Big John's son," he said. "Stand back."

"You're a liar!" the man snarled.

"Ask Big John," Curly answered steadily. He paused, adding without any threat but with premeditated guile, "You better get your boys and hit the road. My outfit's due to come in the next half hour."

"Start walkin'," the man said, waggling the point of his gun suggestively, "in the house. Big John's in the parlor, and God help you, brother, if you *ain't* his son!"

CURLY sensed the presence of other gunmen in the yard behind him. It was a feeling he had no liking for, the feeling of gun barrels pointing at his back. He moved to the steps, climbed to the gallery, glimpsing the misery on Letty's face as he passed and entered the lamplight of the ranch kitchen.

Walking down the long hallway, through the dining room, he heard the tread of boots behind him and knew that the tall man was following, gun in hand. The parlor door was closed, with a streak of light shining under it. Voices, loud in argument, echoed through the house. Curly gripped the knob, swung the door inward and entered the room at a single stride.

Prepared as he was for the unexpected, the scene that greeted his eyes nevertheless shocked him like a physical blow. There were two men in the room, one seated at the center table, the other standing over him, hands flattened on the cloth while he talked in a chanting and unpleasant tone.

The standing man was heavy-set and broad and dressed in black. He had a florid, puffy face and eyes as hard as marble. The seated man was Big John Birch. Always a rawboned man, Big John now was cadaverous, his eyes sunken in dark pockets of flesh, his cheekbones pressing tautly against the dry, gray skin. But his eyes were the most shocking part of him. Once keen and very blue, they now looked glazed and vacant, the eyes of a man whose mind is wavering toward insanity.

Halted and motionless, Curly stared at his father, seeing the whiskey bottle on the table and the way the old man fondled it with trembling, bony hands. The standing man—Judge Yocum, Curly guessed—stopped his harangue with the sound of Curly's entry into

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the room. The lawyer straightened his paunchy frame and blinked at Curly, at the tall man who came in cautiously behind him.

"What's the meaning of this, Frawley?" Yocum demanded icily. "I told you we wanted to be left alone."

The man behind Curly said in a bitter, defiant tone, "This hombre claims he's Big John's son. If he ain't I'll take him out and handle him."

Curly took this moment to move to the center of the room where the light was brighter and his father could see his face. He said, "Hullo, dad. I've come home." There was dread in his heart—and sudden fear.

"Huh?" Big John's mouth fell open and he didn't close it right away. Then, very slowly, very carefully, he rose from his chair and stared at Curly with his vacant, bloodshot eyes. "Curly?" he said hoarsely. "Come home?"

Curly's throat and mouth went dry. He nodded, removing his white hat—Casheen's hat. "How you been, dad?" he asked past the lump in his throat.

A frozen look crawled over the old man's face, and his mouth drew tight and pinched. He sank back into his chair, muttering, "Come home fer money, I suppose. Well, to hell with you!"

Stiff-faced, tense, Curly never moved. He heard Frawley's slowly indrawn breath, saw the expression of grim triumph on Yocum's puffy countenance. There was a house full of silence after that, with the ticking of a clock the only sound.

Frawley went over to stand against the wall, one lean shoulder against the wall-paper while he rolled a cigarette and stared with his greenish eyes at Curly's discomfiture. Curly finally moved to the leather sofa near the fireplace and sat down, his hands on his knees, his blue eyes fixed bleakly on his father's haggard profile.

Yocum's talk was resuming, rising, falling, full of legal terms pompously delivered. Motionless on the sofa, Curly felt Frawley's eyes burning him as the lawyer talked. And he realized that the conversation concerned Broken Bit, and something about a legal-looking paper Yocum held.

Big John sat like a statue, the whiskey bottle in one hand and tilted from time to time as he gulped the fiery liquor down. Curly felt sick. But the old man's face was flushing and presently Big John began to talk. There was no sense to it, no reason. It was the talk of a drunken man, or a crazy one. But Yocum didn't seem to mind, or even hear it. He waited until Big John quit his maundering, then went into the ranch office through its low-framed door and returned with a fresh bottle of whiskey which he placed on the table before the old man. Big John stared at it.

Curly could restrain himself no longer. He glared at Yocum, crying, "He's had enough! Can't you see he's drunk?"

Frawley came across the room in three long strides. He halted in front of Curly, the twist of anger on his lean-boned face. "Shut up, mister! Speak when you're spoke to after this!"

Curly met the man's cold stare, his own look tightening his mouth and eyes. He did not answer, but went back to watching his father and Yocum, his knuckles white where he gripped his knees.

Chapter IV

SECRET OF THE BROKEN BIT

SUDDENLY his thoughts about Big John began to change. He had always considered him a legendary figure, heroic at times, a strong man with an iron will, a man beyond the reach of human frailties. Seeing him like this, a drunken shell of the man he used to be, was almost more than he could bear. Curly had the sudden wild desire to leave, to run, to escape the sickening reality of a man's downfall.

But Curly couldn't seem to move. Frawley was there above him, a threat he had to reckon with if he tried to leave. Out in the yard were three or four of the crew, watching the house, no doubt with orders to enforce the sixgun quarantine that Curly had broken through this night.

Yocum was shoving the paper he held in front of Big John, holding a quill pen toward the old man's hand. "Sign it, John," the lawyer said in a suddenly wheedling tone. "You can take my word it's the thing to do."

But Big John gripped his bottle between both hands and tipped his head far back. Whiskey sloshed into his mouth and down his vest and he coughed and choked and hurled the bottle across the room. With the crash of broken glass, the old man tried to rise. Then, half on his feet, he sagged. The room jarred with the sound of his body rolling to the floor.

Horrified, Curly stared. He was seeing something end before his eyes. And suddenly it was worse than watching his father die. He saw Big John move his arms and legs and heard him groan, saw him try pathetically to rise.

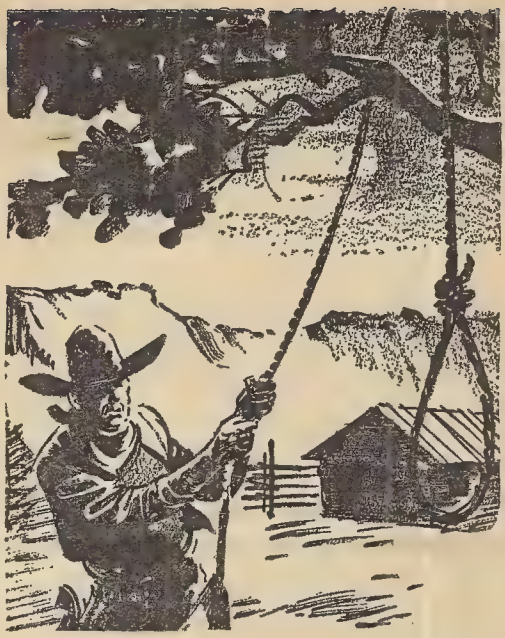
Judge Yocum was bending his thick frame above the fallen man, grasping him roughly by the shoulder and shaking him, a leer on his congested face. Without looking around, he snapped, "Frawley, get me another bottle! Quick!"

Frawley wheeled away toward the office

(Continued on page 94)

HANG THE ROAD AGENT!

By RICHARD LAKE



GEORGE IVES rode surrounded by a Vigilante posse that sunny morning in December, 1863. He was under arrest, and being taken to Virginia City to stand trial for murder.

Professor Thomas J. Dimsdale, the historian of the Alder Gulch diggings, defined "under arrest" as an assurance to the prisoner "that his brains would, without further warning, be blown out if he should attempt to make a break."

Handsome and cold-souled, George Ives showed no inclination to make a break. Cap Williams, the Vigilante leader, and his men carried Navy revolvers at their hips and shotguns across their saddles.

But the posse had ridden all night to make the arrest. They had forded the Passamari River in the dawn. They had finished their long ride with their clothes frozen to them like crackling armor.

Soon one, then another of the Vigilante posse were warming their horses and themselves in brief, playful races among the sagebrush.

News of his arrest had already reached Robbers Roost—as the Daley ranch was called—and Ives' friends had a fresh horse saddled and waiting for him. But the Vigilantes on his heels wouldn't let Ives slow down long enough to make that necessary change. He thundered on into the rough mountainous country above the ranch.

Escape was impossible, but George Ives prolonged his flight as long as he could. When

Around the Virginia City council bonfire, George Ives—despite the backing of Innocent Henry Plummer—slick-tongued his neck into a far slicker hemp collar!

George Ives tossed his long curly hair and flashed his boyish smile.

"Bet the drinks this little ol' pinto of mine can beat the bunch of you to the top of that rise!"

Blood was circulating in numbed bodies. A shout of acceptance greeted Ives' challenge. Ives fed his pony the steel, and the race was on.

George Ives won his race, but he didn't stop to enjoy the drinks. When they topped the rise his pinto held the lead by several lengths, and Ives kept on feeding him the steel. The excited yelps of the posse changed to a deep bay of pursuit. In a second the race was for keeps. George Ives spurred madly for Pete Daley's ranch, about a mile away, where Plummer's gang kept fresh horses for any emergency. The Vigilantes threw everything they had into the pursuit.

his horse tired, he plunged on foot among the boulders. There the Vigilantes quickly surrounded and recaptured him.

He smiled at them as though it had all been in fun. "Sorry to put you to all that trouble," he said genially. "But it was a good race even if I didn't make it."

George Ives rode the rest of the way to Virginia City in a hollow square of horsemen, and a dozen shotguns were aimed at him with nervous fingers on the triggers! There was no fooling this time.

Miners and bullwhackers and plain peace-loving people of all kinds in the Alder Gulch diggings were slowly rousing themselves to stand together against the terror of the Plummer band of Innocents. Men were being robbed and murdered without compunction in broad daylight, and for as little as a few dollars or a few ounces of gold dust.

George Ives was arrested by Cap Williams, Vigilante leader, and his posse for shooting a young Dutchman named Nicholas Thibalt, and stealing his mules. Men knew that Ives was guilty of many other murders and robberies, but fear of the Innocents had sealed many lips. The murder of the good-natured Dutch boy was a spark that set off long-stored resentment.

Wilbur Fisk Sanders was the nephew of Sidney Edgerton, who had been appointed by Abraham Lincoln as Chief Justice of Idaho Territory. Sanders was in Virginia City, buying a stage ticket to return to his home in Bannock, ninety miles away. Mortimer H. Lott, a Vigilante leader, caught Sanders just before the stage left and persuaded him to stay and prosecute the case against Ives.

TWO THOUSAND miners jammed a narrow square around a great wood fire on December 19, 1863. A rider pounded the trail to Bannock to get Henry Plummer to come to the assistance of his chief lieutenant. Members of the Innocents gang swaggered among the miners, guns in hand, cursing.

"Ives better be turned loose!"

"If George Ives hangs there'll be some meddlers with daylight through 'em!"

But there were other men moving among the crowd. Quiet, fearful men, who sensed that fate was turning her face away from the road agents.

"Don't use my name," these men would whisper. "I don't want to get mixed up in this, but I know for a fact that George Ives..." And then into the ears of Sanders and the others of the prosecution, these fearful men would whisper facts against Ives and other members of the Innocents.

Wilbur Fisk Sanders, young and fearless, directed the prosecution, gaining point after point until the defense hung tattered and listless.

On the evening of December 21, the jury of twenty-four miners brought back a verdict of guilty. Sanders leaped into the firelight, a perfect target for the road agents' guns. "I move that this miners' meeting approve the findings of the jury and declare George Ives guilty of the murder of Nicholas Thibalt!"

Cap Williams cried, "I second the motion!"

The miners' judge, Byam, put the question. The gulch roared with *ayes!*

Sanders stepped more clearly into the light. There was a clicking as the thin line of guards cocked their shotguns.

"I move now," Sanders shouted, "that George Ives be hanged by the neck!"

"Second the motion!"

Again the roar of *ayes* thundered out.

The dull rumble of threats from Ives's owlhoot friends was drowned by the chorus.

A rope was now thrown over a log projecting from an unfinished cabin. Eager hands tied the hangman's knot, and a packing case was arranged conveniently beneath to form the drop. The guards were formed in a triple ring around Ives, presenting a thick forest of leveled shotgun muzzles to the crowd.

George Ives stepped out into the firelight now, and addressed Sanders. A hush fell over the crowd. Ives bowed handsomely, and smiled. He removed his hat; his fair hair glistened in the firelight.

"Colonel Sanders," Ives said in a courteous voice, "I believe you are a gentleman and will therefore consider what I, as a gentleman, am about to ask of you. My mother and my sisters know nothing of my career. It's been pretty wild, I admit. I ask time to write them a letter, so that they will not suspect the fate that has befallen me; and to make a will. Have my execution postponed until tomorrow so that I can do these things. I promise not to try to escape, and I will tell my friends not to interfere."

John X. Beidler, standing nearby, gave a harsh laugh. "Sanders, ask Ives how much time he gave the Dutchman before he shot him between the eyes!"

Ives' last gamble had failed. Sanders promised to write the letter if Ives would tell him what he wanted said, and he promised that Ives' property would be sent to his mother after the cost of the trial was deducted.

The road agents and friends of Ives, seeing that now the jig was really up, crowded around angrily.

"Show these stranglers they can't murder an innocent man!"

"Cut the rope!"

"Turn Ives loose!"

"Let him leave the country!"

The mob gathered, roared, surged toward the cabin where the rope hung.

George Ives, standing on the packing box with his hands tied behind him and the hangman's knot under his left ear, uttered the password of the Innocents, the call for help. "I am innocent," he cried. "I am innocent of *this* crime."

The voice of Wilbur Fisk Sanders came clear in the moonlight. His words became the motto of the Vigilantes; they rang with prophetic doom for Plummer's Innocents.

"Men, do your duty!"

Two sentries yanked the packing box aside. George Ives, Plummer's chief lieutenant, courteous dandy and deadly murderer, dropped, twitched twice, and hung motionless in the moonlight.

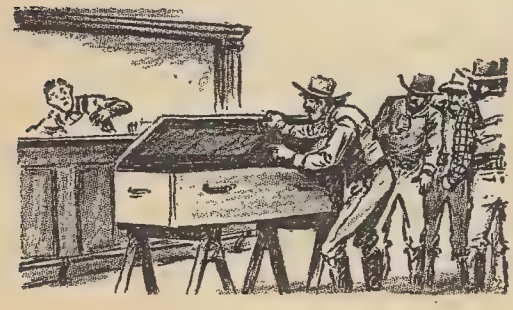
Few heard Byam, the miners' judge, declare solemnly, "He is dead. His neck is broken."

FRONTIER ODDITIES

by WAGGENER and ROBBINS

The kindly neighbors of John Cheever, fiercely proud Montana nester, were determined not to let the bank foreclose on his drought-stricken farm. Since he refused all loans, his friends placed a large sum of money in a strongbox and buried it on Cheever's land in the path of his plow. When Cheever joyfully reported digging up a bandit's cache, they rejoiced with him, but on inspection the neighbors were startled to discover that it was not the same box they had buried. As the nester drove thankfully to town to pay off his mortgage, his would-be financiers crept back under his fence and recovered their no-longer needed donation.

For more than fifty years, Forty-Niner Sy Wynant looked for gold, but it was not until 1901 that his search ended. He panned his first pay dirt in the Panamints, and it was a rich strike. The grizzled old prospector was overcome with joy. Tremblingly, he snatched up a fat nugget and kissed it. The pellet slipped past his toothless, shriveled gums and lodged in his windpipe. On the lodestone of his million dollar mine, Wynant choked to death.



Crafty saloonkeeper Derek O'Malley started the Frontier's shortest stampede when he reported digging up an ancient coffin containing a dried skeleton and a fabulous poke of gold in a coulee along the Dakota-Montana line. A wild rush followed and, for a month, the Irish liquor vendor did a booming business in his new gold field headquarters at Alexander City. To inspire the prospectors, the coffin was on daily exhibition at O'Malley's saloon. It was there the gold rush ended: a miner pried up the coffin lid and discovered that the supposedly ancient casket was lined with a six-week-old copy of THE PANAMINT NEWS.

Bandits and badmen nabbed by Sheriff Rod Petry of Succasuna, New Mexico, just naturally broke down and confessed. Petry had his own system of third-degree. A former barber, he tied his prisoner to a chair and lathered up. Then, using an outsized, keen-edged razor, he proceeded to give the captured gunslick the closest shave of his life, sprinkling in his questions between strokes. Invariably, the limp, trembling outlaw, expecting to have his throat cut any minute, was eager to tell all. Petry collected more pleas of guilty than any other law officer in the Southwest.

THE SECRET OF MASSACRE MOUNTAIN

Dramatic Novel of Renegades' Gold

By GIFF CHESHIRE

Chapter I

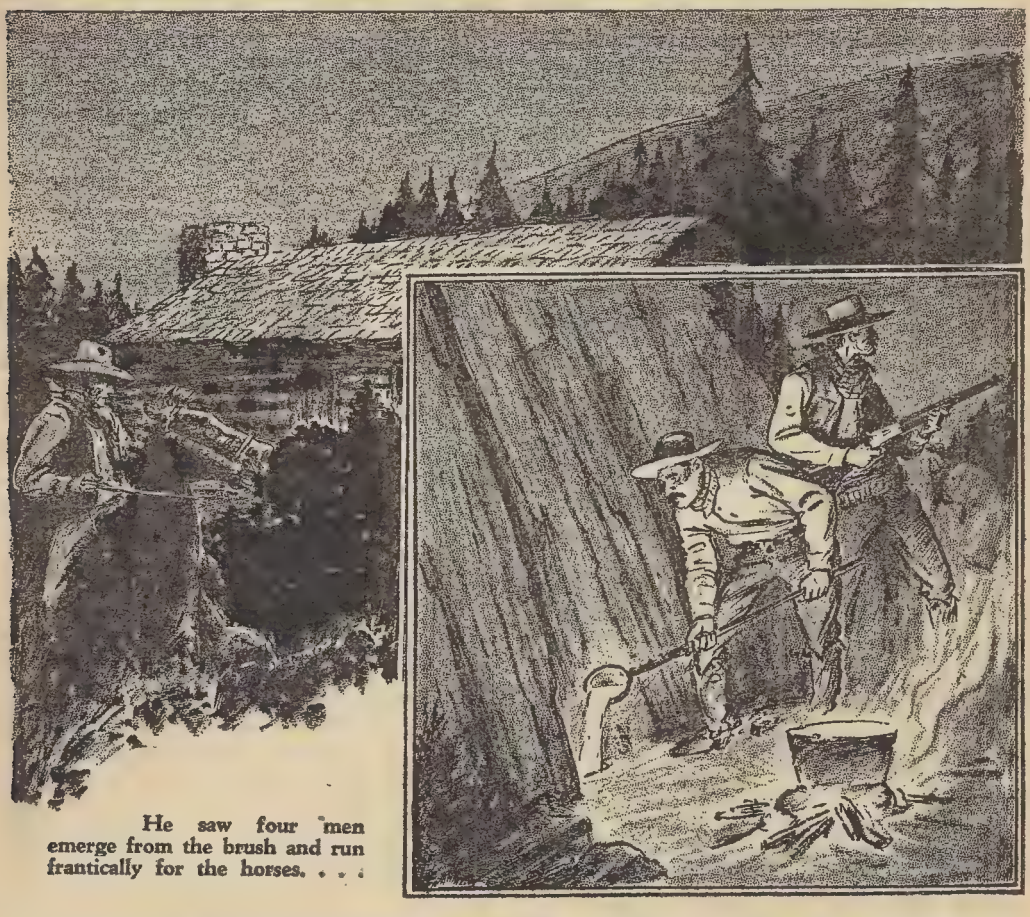
WAY STATION FOR DEAD MEN

THE stage driver grinned as he wheeled the big Concord out of the main grooves of the mountain road and rolled toward the log-walled relay station setting snugly among the evergreens.

"There's your new job, mister," he said. "All you gotta do is tend the hosses and feed the passengers." His glance swept the weather-bronzed face of the young man on the box beside him as he added, "And dodge lead."

"That simple, is it?" Dunc Snell asked, smiling good-naturedly. The place was idyllic in its primeval charm, but a strange sense of uneasiness came to him as he looked about. This was the summit of Salt Lick Pass, a forested stretch in an otherwise bare range of mountains, and the halfway point on the Wolseyville-Thistle Hills stage run, where passengers were fed and the horses changed. But Dunc's secret interest in it was personal.

Why did those Four Horsemen from Hell ride out of the misty past, to torture from an owlhoot ghost the answer to the riddle of Salt Lick Pass, and then defy—with mad-dog guts and killers' lead —the unwritten, ancient law: "Let the dead rest in peace"



He saw four men emerge from the brush and run frantically for the horses. . . .

"Who'd want to kill off the keepers?" Dunc asked.

The driver halted the rig in front of the station, glancing at Dunc again. "Your only neighbor is old man Hume. He homesteaded this little plateau when you was still a button. He owns that wayside stand we passed down the road. Sells produce to travelers. Stuff like honey and bread, cheese and milk and fruit. Stage passengers used to buy the stuff to eat before the company put the relay station here to give 'em noon dinner. Hume's sore about that. He's got a daughter, Roxana." The old man prepared to swing down to the ground. "I wouldn't get het up about her, though. Roxana's mighty purty, but the Humes just don't like other folks."

Dunc followed him to the ground. The passengers had alighted already and were gazing at the thick, low-skirted cedars and the falls that tumbled over an escarpment behind the station, the run-off surging wildly under a log bridge the road passed over.

In a low voice, Dunc asked, "You think Hume's taking out his grudge by beefing station-keepers?"

"I heard it was your job to find that out, bub. I don't think nothing. But was I you, I'd keep both my eyes skinned in that direction."

The passengers were filing into the station. There was a temporary man here, Dunc had been told, but the hombre was mighty anxious to get going again. He just didn't like the place. Boogered. Dunc didn't blame him.

"You gotta understand we're handing you a tough job," the division boss had told Dunc, the day before. "We've had two men killed up there, already. We don't know why, and it's got the sheriff stumped. The man there now

spooked out in two weeks. Do you want the job, *and* the risks?"

"I do," Dunc had shot back, a little savagely. He was relieved that he had not been recognized. Yet there was no marked resemblance between himself and his younger brother, Tod, the first of the two men who had been murdered at the summit station. Tod had been a fiddle-foot, but the sheriff had found Dunc's address among his belongings and notified him of the boy's death. Dunc had given the stage people the name of Davis, for some instinct had warned him that it would be best not to advertise himself as the brother of one of the victims.

He drifted into the station. There was one large room with a rock fireplace at one end and a big table at the other. The kitchen opened off beyond that and from the lay-out there appeared to be two or three store-rooms in that direction. Fifty yards west of the station was a big barn, where a couple of dozen horses were kept to furnish the relays. His job would be to tend to them and fix food for the passengers who arrived each day at noon. It would be a monotonous job, but he welcomed this fact, for it would give him a chance to tend to private business.

The table was covered with oil cloth and now bore dishes of boiled beans, potatoes, bacon and gravy, and heavy mugs of steaming coffee. The passengers were already eating, for the mountain air whetted appetites. Dunc was hungry, but he decided to take a look at the man he was relieving, and he went on into the kitchen.

A nondescript man of middle age turned from the big range and nodded sourly. "You the new station keeper? Well, mister, you can commence by carrying these spuds out to them wolves. And you kin help Elmer Olden hitch, when he's ready. Then you kin wash the dishes. The east-bound's already gone. After that, just duck every time you hear a sound. Me, I'm riding out with Elmer."

"Listen!" Dunc snapped. "What is this setup? Have you got any ideas about it?"

"I got ideas about making tracks outta here. Nobody's shot at *me* yet, but it's hell to keep expecting somebody to!"

"You seen anything of the Humes?"

The man grinned feebly. "I seen the girl. She's a eye-filler, bub, and was I your age, mebbe I'd be fool enough to risk gettin' shot to hell to get next to her. I figure that's what it amounts to."

"Gets lonesome, doesn't it?"

"Oh, I wouldn't care about that. There's a lot of people go through here. Freighters and ranchers and hossbackers, one way and another. When a man wants to jaw, he can find somebody. You gonna take these spuds out to the table?"

Dunc fell to work, helping get the wayfarers fed, and afterward he helped Elmer Olden, the stage driver, hitch fresh spans to the Concord. Yet when it rolled away, with passengers and his predecessor, a sudden sense of loneliness and impending personal danger hit him. By mid-afternoon he had the place cleaned up and nothing but the evening barn chores lay before him. So he decided to take a look at the Humes.

HE HAD a gun-belt, and well-oiled Colt .44 in his warbag, and he got the latter out. But after a moment's reflection he put it away. He had been careful to play a disinterested role to this point, and there was no sense in conveying the impression that he had come to declare war on anybody until such became necessary. Pulling his big hat onto his yellow head, he left the way station and headed down the road.

It was late summer and, though unbearably hot in the valley, it was cool up here. The cedar scented the air, a mild breeze was stirring, and the droning roar of the falls behind the station was pleasant. The stage driver had told Dunc how it happened to bear its grisly unofficial name.

"Bloody Creager was a heller in this country, about twenty years ago, him and a hand-picked pack of curly wolves. They rambled all over but they usually holed up in here. It wasn't settled hereabouts, then. Salt Lick Pass was little more than a game trail. When they were in these parts, they camped there at the summit, by the falls. Right where our station is, now."

"But why do they call it Massacre Mountain?" Dunc had asked.

"On account of the way Bloody Creager vacated it. On a hot lead writ issued by some U. S. Marshals and a big posse. Seems this Creager'd just pulled a job some place a long way from here. Had to do with bullion, I heard. They come loping back and the marshals trailed 'em. Fought it out at the summit. Creager's bunch stood the law off five days before it was wiped out."

"Was it wiped out?"

"So I heard. Killed, hung or jailed. But that was a long time ago, bub. Don't reckon it's got anything to do with somebody killing off the help around this old station."

Carter Hume's wayside stand was a quarter-of-a-mile down the grade from the stage station. Rocky heights lifted north of the stage road, but south of it was a small mountain valley, with a floor as flat as if it had been graded. Beyond it mountains rose sheer again, and it was probably a quarter-of-a-mile deep and twice that in length, with the creek into which the falls tumbled cutting it in half. It

was rich looking soil, lush with vegetation. Hume had homesteaded it long ago.

A small, neat ranchhouse stood back from the road, shaded by tall cedar, and behind it was barnyard and outbuildings. The structure beside the road, where Hume sold produce to wayfarers, was made of logs, and had a sheltered, open front. As he drew up, Dunc was lifting his hat, smiling slightly at a girl who turned to look at him with level, impersonal eyes.

She stood beyond the counter from him, gazing questioningly across several baskets of fresh apples, plums and peaches and a display of bread, cinnamon rolls, butter and cheese protected from insects by mosquito netting. The stage driver had called her pretty, but she was a striking beauty, tall and dark and clear-eyed.

"You're Roxana Hume?" Dunc began uncertainly.

"Yes. And you're the new man the stage people sent up, I suppose?"

"Dunc Davis. The jigger I relieved said I could get fresh fruit here. I'd like two-bits worth of them red apples, Ma'am."

He watched her as she weighed the fruit on a small balance scale. There was a steely quality, a deep unfriendliness in her manner that seemed all out of proportion to the legitimate grudge she could bear the stage company for taking away much of the stand's business.

"I'd like to try those cinnamon rolls, too," he said, after a while.

She fixed these for him without speaking.

Dunc frowned, nettled by the studied indifference. "I'm wondering why you folks never made a deal to supply produce to the station, Miss Hume. Seems that'd be worth more to you than the stuff the stage passengers used to buy."

She lifted her eyes from a deep study of the counter, her cheeks blanching. "Oh, no! My father'd never stand for that! He won't even like it when I tell him I sold you this little order. And you'd better go now. He's coming this way."

Dunc followed her glance across the flat. An elderly man, looking riled, was pacing deliberately from the barn in their direction.

Dunc grinned at her. "I'd like to meet your father, because I'd like to see more of his daughter."

He watched the flush creep into her cheeks. He realized that she had had very little to do with men, outside of her father, and was woman enough to like the compliment he had paid her. She shook her head. "Please go! It'll be unpleasant!"

"There's no reason why it should be that I can see," Dunc returned cheerfully. "I'd sure like to be friends."

"It's—it's out of the question." Yet there was wistfulness in her voice. "I wish you'd go!"

Carter Hume strode around the end of the building, a big, stooped man with snow-white hair and beard. His face was passive, except for the clear eyes, which burned in animosity. He gave no greeting, standing stiff and forbidding.

Dunc was both puzzled and annoyed. "I was telling your daughter," he said stiffly, "that I see no reason why the station couldn't buy more stuff than you lost the sale of when it started serving meals."

The answer was quick and frosty. "We want no truck with your outfit, mister. We don't want you hanging around." He glanced at his daughter. "Do we, Roxie?"

The girl drew a deep breath. "No, father."

"Does that answer you, mister?" Hume asked.

Dunc nodded. "In a fashion, but there's a whale of a lot it doesn't."

"I don't believe I'd try to find out the rest," Hume said, his mouth a hard line.

Chapter II

RIDERS OF THE NIGHT

THE seeming serenity at Massacre Mountain was a deceptive thing. As he swung into the even tenor of his easy routine, Dunc had often to remind himself of the sinister undercurrents playing here. He grew quickly to like the rugged beauty of the place. The arrival of the two stages each mid-day was a welcome diversion, breaking the monotony and furnishing company while demanding only a fraction of his time. He liked horses, so morning and evening chores were a pleasure, and occasionally there was work in the blacksmith shop: shoeing a horse, mending a piece of harness or making a minor repair to one of the coaches.

Between times there was other traffic on the road, though it was not heavy. The slow and ponderous freight wagons connecting the railroad at Wolseyville with the Frontier town of Thistle Hills came by every few days and usually stopped at the station to let the drivers water their teams and stretch their legs and pass the time of day. There were casual travelers, and twice some of these camped overnight at the summit.

Try as he would, Dunc Snell could see nothing in this pattern that seemed to bear on the killing of the two station keepers who had preceded him. Tod Snell, he had been told, had been found dead just outside the stables. The second man had been discovered in the middle of the big yard. The sheriff had come up on each occasion. He believed that the shots had been fired from the rim, a vantage

point within range of either rifle or handgun. But there was nothing to substantiate the theory. The bullets extracted from the dead men had both been of .45 calibre.

The mystery of the eccentric Humes baffled Dunc. It was totally unacceptable to him that the girl could have had a hand in murder. He had carried from his one meeting with her the impression of aching loneliness. He had the feeling that, without her father's interference, she would have liked him and welcomed a chance for companionship with someone her own age. In spite of her grimness, Dunc had noted that her mouth was warm, her slender body shapely and womanly. A deep anger began to crystalize in him against Carter Hume. The old man was forcing the girl into the mold of his own peculiarities, and she did not fit there.

He forgot about seeing her again, knowing it would do her more harm than good under the circumstances. Somehow he had to get to the bottom of Carter Hume's hatred of the way station. If nothing better, he would have to sever his own connection with the stage company and meet Roxana on better terms, for he knew that she was a girl of a calibre he was not likely to encounter soon again, and he could not conceive of her having had any part in Tod Snell's death.

He found both of the two ready explanations of Carter Hume's attitude totally inadequate. The old man had harshly turned down an offer to supply provisions for the station, which would have compensated him for any financial loss he had suffered because of the station's restaurant policy. That was out. And the presence of a station keeper, here in his high and lonely isolation, did not seem to justify murder, however much Hume might dislike such an intrusion. Dunc could not dismiss the feeling that there was something else here, something deeply hidden, that involved Hume in the two mysterious killings, even if he had not committed them.

During the next two weeks Dunc experienced not the slightest evidence of sinister doings. The days were nicely broken by the wayfarers, and the nights were cool and steeped in peace. It was hard to remain vigilant day and night, under those circumstances, yet he forced himself to it, knowing that someone might be hoping to lull him into carelessness.

Then came the night when the distant drum of fast-ridden horses wakened him. He sat up in his bunk, listening intently, screening the low roar of the falls for that quick staccato beat. It came from downgrade, in the direction of the Humes, and when he was certain it was no trick of the senses Dunc swung out of his bunk and began to dress hurriedly. He had kept his gun-belt slung over the back of a chair near his bed, and he buckled it on, found his hat and stepped out into the night.

The sound had faded, and now there was only the low, drowsy roar of the falls. There was only a little moon, but too much for safety. An electric excitement was stirring in him as he tried to decide whether the riders had turned in at Hume's place or had emerged from there. He was inclined to believe the latter. Horsebackers arriving to visit an old eccentric at this late hour would not approach so rapidly. It was more as though somebody had left in a spanking hurry.

Edging through the cedars above the roar, he moved down in the direction of the Hume place. A little later, across from and above the roadside stand, he questioned his own senses. Hume's house was dark. The night was as peaceful as any had ever been. Shaking his head, Dunc turned and made his way back to the station. .

Bright and early the next morning he made occasion to visit the stand. He had already observed that the old man paid it little attention, letting his daughter meet the public. Roxana, too, spent only a little of her time there, keeping her eye on it, mostly from the house and coming out only when somebody stopped.

No one came, now, and the upward-swinging door on the front of the stand was still battened down. Dunc turned away presently, informed of what he had wanted to know. Several riders had gone in to the house recently and emerged faster than they had entered. The lack of activity around the Hume place worried him, but he decided against going in to investigate. He returned to the station and its easy, monotonous routine.

BY THE end of another week Dunc was beginning to understand why his immediate predecessor had boogered out. His own nerves were getting jumpy from all this peace and solitude, in which so much portended and from which so little had as yet developed.

Then, as abruptly as in the first break in the unchanging pattern, events hurtled out of a quiet night. He had been asleep several hours when apprehension, growing ever more acute within him, prodded him wide awake. The continual noise of the falls had long since resolved into the background of his consciousness, a pattern of sound against which alien racket soon became acute.

Dunc slid out of bed and across the floor to the window. All seemed serene out there for a brief moment, then he saw a flitting shadow in the pale moonlight. He slid hurriedly into his jeans and boots, strapped his gun-belt around his lean hips and prowled lightly to the kitchen door.

He opened it with utmost caution and, after

a long moment, stepped out onto the back porch, which snugged close to the cliff and was in deep shadow. He waited there, puzzled, tension growing in him, with a sense of bafflement. Then he saw movement again, in the shadows near the stables.

"Come out where I can see you," Dunc yelped, "if you don't want a hole in your hide!"

There was no response. For an instant he suspected his own imagination, then somebody ducked from an exposed position, cutting toward the open stable door. Dunc snapped a quick shot after it, aiming high because he did not know who it was.

Guns detonated in three directions, and he threw quick shots at two flashes. He drew fire again, but he was concealed deeply in the shadows and, changing position each time he fired, he remained unhurt.

Excitement danced in him now. There was a crashing in the brush below the stable and he knew somebody was on the run. He had surprised this party, and it was now trying to get away. He dared not risk himself in the open, so he cut through the station. From a front window he saw four men emerge from the brush and frantically fork the horses that had been ground-tied at the edge of the road, in the direction of Carter Hume's. Asaddle, they wheeled and thundered away to eastward.

Dunc moved out through the kitchen and re-locked the back door. A glance at his watch, by matchlight, showed him it was nearly three in the morning. His nocturnal visitors evidently had come there only to prowl, and had hoped to get away again undetected. It could mean but one thing; that there was something here that they meant to secure. It made the killing of the two other station keepers more plausible, suddenly. They could either have learned something of the reason for this secretive search, or could have come through a shootout such as had just transpired with considerable less luck.

Dunc wrinkled his brow as he reloaded his gun and returned to bed. The last trace of drowsiness had been shaken from him, and he remained awake, puzzling. His mind kept going back to Bloody Creager, in the long ago. That was the only thing that made any sense. Something remained here out of the past. Elmer Olden, the stage driver with whom he had ridden up, and told him that Bloody Creager's last big haul had dealt with gold bullion. It seemed incredible that it could still be on the site, somewhere, that there could still be men who knew about it, who meant to have it. Yet there seemed to be nothing else here of interest to nocturnal prowlers.

Then Dunc was piling out of his bunk again and moving on soundless bare feet through the station. He had heard the sound of a footfall on the front porch. Before he had crossed the big front room there was a rapping on the door.

Sixgun in hand, Dunc called, "Who's there?"

"Roxana Hume, Mr. Davis! Please open the door! I need help, terribly!"

Chapter III

BLOODY CREAGER

DUNC let her inside and shut the door quickly. There had been deep agitation in her voice, and she halted near the door, scarcely visible.

Almost roughly, he asked, "What is it?"

"My father! He—some men were there, and they beat him terribly! He wants to talk to you!"

Dunc hesitated for a moment. Her voice rang with sincerity, but there was the chance that she was unwittingly leading him into a trap. He asked, "Who beat him up?"

"Rufe Kelvin and his men," Roxana said quickly. "They were here, weren't they? I heard the shooting as I left the house!

"Somebody was here," Dunc admitted. "They came here from your place?"

"Yes. There is something Kelvin's been trying for weeks to get out of my father! I don't know what it is! He showed up here about two months ago, with three others. My father is afraid of them, but he has refused to tell me why. But I think he wants to tell you. He's afraid that they'll wind up by killing him."

Dunc went to pull on his boots and get his hat and gun-belt. He was totally mystified, but he had the feeling that Roxana Hume had come to him in good faith. Whatever this meant, it might furnish him with a lead to his brother's killers, and he was willing to risk a lot to find out who they were.

Man and woman moved cautiously down the road and turned in to the darkened ranchhouse. There was a light inside, and Dunc could see a splinter of it under one of the closely drawn blinds. They went in through the kitchen, and he kept a hand close to the grip of his gun.

Carter Hume was sprawled in a chair in the front room, and one glance assured Dunc that he had indeed been given a working over. His face, under a mop of snowwhite hair, was battered and caked with blood, and his lips and eyes were puffed. The large-framed old man watched Dunc's approach without greeting.

"Sit down," he grunted suddenly. "Roxie, go start a pot of coffee, then come back. I want you to hear what I've got to tell Davis."

The girl disappeared, and Dunc looked

around. The room was pleasant and well furnished, showing a woman's touch. He saw that pride had kept the old man sitting in his chair when he obviously should have been in bed. Hume lapsed into silence until the girl returned.

Dunc studied her again as she quickly took a chair in one corner of the room. Except for agitation in her large eyes, she looked composed. He had never seen a more beautiful girl, and again he had the feeling that evil could not lurk behind such an exterior.

Carter Hume spoke at last. "Roxie told me you called yourself Davis, but I'm betting you're kin to that first man that was killed at the station."

Dunc nodded. "Yes. His brother. My right name's Dunc Snell."

"Did you come here to kill me for killing him?"

"Not until I'm certain you did it. Which, to this point, I'm not."

The old man nodded reflectively. "You ever hear of Bloody Creager?"

"Yeah. Heard him and his outfit were wiped out by the falls."

"*Almost* wiped out," Carter Hume corrected. "Snell, I'm scared my days are numbered, and I'm worried about Roxie. I haven't got a relative in the world besides her. We've lived well here, but I have little cash money. So I got to change face and tell you something I always hoped nobody on earth'd ever know. Something Roxie'll be hearing for the first time, too. She's in danger, boy. You look honest and spunky. I want you to get her out of here."

"I won't go, Father!" the girl said fiercely.

"Mebbe if I can clean up the situation, you can come back," Hume said, "in a little while. But I want you away until that's done. And it's only because I might not be here when you get back that I'm telling you this. I heard the shooting up at your place, Snell. That means that Rufe Kelvin and his curly wolves were prowling again."

"Yes. Why?"

"Bub, there's a crazy kind of gold mine within a hundred feet of the station. A man-made mine. Rufe Kelvin wants it. He's been working on me ever since he showed up in these parts. Tried to win me around by offering to dig and market it for a split, at first. Then they tried threats. A few nights ago they come here and beat me up, but they didn't find out what they want to know. They was here, tonight, but they still don't know anything. I'm afraid they'll try to hit at me through Roxie, next. That's one form of punishment I couldn't stand. That's why I want you to take her away; I can make it worth your while."

Dunc's lips were pursed in a soundless whistle. "It's Bloody Creager's bullion!" he breathed.

Hume shook his head. "No bullion. It's like I said, a gold mine, but one that men made. Desperate men. All but one of those who had a hand in it are dead."

"You—"

"Yes. I can—or *was*—Bloody Creager."

THE girl's cheeks had gone deathly pale, and Dunc swallowed. Roxana went to the kitchen and returned with three cups of steaming coffee. The men sipped thoughtfully for a moment. A thousand questions crowded Dunc's mind, but he held them in check.

Then Carter Hume spoke again. "Yet Bloody Creager *was* killed in that last shoot-out. He crawled away, with a dozen bullet holes in him. He kept clear of the marshal's outfit. A woman found him, an angel of a woman, and she brought him back to life and eventually to health. But Bloody Creager died and Carter Hume was born full-grown. He married the woman and they went a long way off, and in time she gave him a daughter. Three years later she died. And the black hell rose in Carter Hume again, and for a little while Bloody Creager was back. He returned to the bloody place that by now was called Massacre Mountain. He brought the little girl. That is what saved him. He settled here, within sight of Massacre Mountain, as a reminder to him of his responsibility to that girl and her mother."

"Didn't the officers suspect that Creager had got away?" Dunc asked.

"They didn't know for sure. Nobody knew exactly what the man looked like. A half dozen outlaws were killed in the fracas. When Creager was never heard of again, it was supposed that he was dead."

"But I heard some of them went to the pen."

"One man. Rufe Kelvin. He was Creager's segundo. He was away from camp when the attack came. They caught him later. Kelvin himself never realized that Creager was still alive until after he'd finished his twenty year stretch. But he kept wondering what had happened to the bullion. After he got out, he eventually drifted back. Once he laid eyes on Carter Hume, he knew that Creager was still alive. He's been trying ever since to find out where it's hidden."

"But you said there is no bullion!"

"And that's right. Only Kelvin doesn't know it. Bullion's clumsy stuff to handle and get rid of, son. And there was a hell of a lot of it in this batch. When you were only a kid, there was a banker in a place called Broken Knee. He was a big, dignified looking cuss, and he had a good reputation in his town. But, on the sly, he was acting as a fence,

helping road-agents get rid of stuff they couldn't toss on a counter for a drink or a new shirt.

"He'd buy it at a big discount, and collect it, and every so often he'd send a strong-arm squad back East to peddle it to outlaw elements there. Bloody Creager knew about this and hit him when he wasn't expecting it. That was the bullion. A big haul. I'd guess there was a hundred thousand dollars worth.

"That much stuff is a burden, especially to a curly-wolf crew. We holed up there at the falls, and we packed in a few sacks of blacksmith's coal and some bellows and built some rock ovens. We meant to melt the bullion and cast it into smaller slugs and that could be divided up and toted easier and sold here and there. Too much waste in sawing it.

"But by drifting down the ridge at night, the marshal's outfit managed to surprise us. We held them off for five days. We had a reason. We melted the gold and we poured it into a crevice. We destroyed the equipment we used. The gold's still there, molded into the rocks, with ten feet of rubble and dirt on top of it. Like I say, a gold mine, with one small but rich deposit. We didn't want the government confiscating it. We figured that if any of us come through, it could be mined out again."

"And Rufe Kelvin didn't know about that?"

"No. He'd been away for several days before the attack. But he knew that the marshal never found it, that it was likely still around somewhere. And that's what he's after, now."

"But my brother, and the other fellow? Why were they killed?"

"Your brother was killed because he got tough with them. He caught them prowling around there at night, just like you did, and cut loose with a six. They gunned him down. When it brought the sheriff out here, questioning me, it gave Rufe Kelvin an idea. He figured he could scare me into telling where the gold is hidden. They killed the second man deliberately, to bring the sheriff out again. But the sheriff didn't have enough on me, and I didn't scare."

"What," Snell asked, "have you got against the stage company?"

"You can savvy why I didn't want them to put a station smack on top of that gold, so's I couldn't dig it up, if I ever wanted to. I've had to live a lonely life, and I've encouraged the idea that I was a sour old crack-pot. I tried to scare you out of hanging around Roxie because I had the feeling you were tracking the killers. I was scared that if you got to poking around, there was danger of me being exposed. I've tried to make retribution for my crimes in my own way, and I don't feel that Roxie's suffering disgrace is part of it."

"You never tried to dig up the gold?"

"No. But I've always figured it was there for Roxie, if she ever needed it."

"Well, if you don't really want it, why have you put up such a scrap to keep this Kelvin from getting it? Wouldn't that be better than risking Roxie's life, as well as your own?"

The old man set down his empty coffee cup with a sigh. "In Kelvin's hands it would only start some more hellin' and killin'. That gold's done enough harm, Snell! If it can't be used for good, I say it's better ten feet in the ground. There was a time when I figured a man could get anything he wants out of life by laying the cash on the barrel head. Mebbe you still figure that way, boy. I was wrong. What I've really liked has cost me no more than the work of my hands. We've had a good life here, and it's Roxie's home. She says she wants to stay here after I've gone. So I want you to help me get her out of the way for a while, until I can fix things so she can."

"I won't go, father! I've told you that!" The girl's voice was low but fierce.

Carter Hume smiled at her, and Dunc sensed the affection that was in the old man. "You'd just complicate things by staying, Roxie," he said. "Snell, I want you to take her back to the station with you, tonight, and tomorrow I want you to slip her on the Thistle Hills stage."

Dunc nodded. "I think your dad's right, Roxana."

After a long moment she nodded dully. "All right. If I've got to, I will."

"Then go pack your things," her father said. "I want you to get over to the station before daybreak."

After she had left the room, Hume leaned forward, dropping his voice. "I said I'd reward you for the favor, Snell. I feel you're honest and decent, and that Roxie'll be in good hands with you. If this thing shakes down wrong for me, and Kelvin's still prowling around, I don't want her ever to come back. And she'll need money. So I'm telling you where that gold is. If she can't come back, I want you to fix it so she'll be taken care of. You can have what's left over."

Dunc shook his head. "I don't want to know. I like your daughter, Hume. I hope she'll like me. If she does, I'll be taking care of her in the way a woman wants."

For the first time the old man's eyes softened. "I banked a lot on the hunch that you'd say that, kid. So I'm appointing you to carry out my wishes after I'm gone. I want that treasure to do some good in the world. I want it to do something for no-account kids, like I was, and keep them off the owlhoot trails. But I've never been able to do that, myself.

"Even if I claimed I'd found Bloody Creager's gold, the publicity'd be dangerous. I never could bring myself to risk disgracing Roxie. But you could find it without any danger of that. I'm exacting no promise from you, kid, but that's my wish. If you ever start looking for it, Snell, step off thirty-one paces east from the edge of the falls and start digging there, at the base of the cliff."

Chapter IV

OWLHOOTERS SOMETIMES WIN

IT DAWNED on Dunc Snell that he was in possession of dangerous information. Roxana emerged from her bedroom with a coat and hat on, and carrying a small satchel. She kissed her father, straining against him for a long moment, and Dunc saw the misery in the old eyes as they went out, prodded by the daylight only a short while away.

They moved swiftly to the station, skulking the evergreens beside the road, for while Dunc believed that Rufe Kelvin and his men had long since departed for their owlhoot camp, there was no need in running risks. Even so, it was growing lighter by the time they were within the station walls.

Dunc started a fire in the kitchen stove. "I'm hungry, and I expect you are," he said.

Roxana slipped out of her coat and carefully removed her hat. "I'll fix it. Maybe you're going to have company for a spell, Dunc. I'm not going away. I wanted my father to think so, for if anything happens to him, he'll feel better thinking I'm out of the way."

Dunc stared at her, frowning. "Now, listen—!"

She cut him off quickly. "Dunc, I heard you tell father that—that you liked me. That you hoped I'd like you. I can tell you this, now. I'll hate you as long as I live if you make me go."

After a studious moment, Dunc grinned feebly. "All right, on one condition. That you don't take foolish chances. You'll have to keep inside all the time and hide when the stages come through. When your dad sees Kelvin again, he'll tell him you've gone. You owe it to him to let Kelvin think that."

Roxana nodded. "I've got part of a plan, Dunc, and I want you to help me. Kelvin'll think I've gone, and he won't know that you understand why he's been prowling around your place. That gives us a jump on him, and we've got to make use of it before they do my father any more harm!"

Her seriousness touched him, and Dunc lifted her chin with his finger. "All right, but smile a little. Unwind those nerves."

"Dunc," she said softly, "you don't mind that I'm—that I'm an outlaw's daughter?"

"You're not!" he said harshly. "Carter Hume was no outlaw when he fathered you; he hasn't been one since. I've got a feeling you'd ought to be proud of the man he has been!"

"I am, Dunc. And I'm glad you feel that way."

Dunc did not crowd the moment, but a thrill shot through him at the realization that she did not find him unacceptable. He let her fix breakfast, and they ate leisurely.

After a time Dunc asked, "What's this plan of yours?"

"Rufe Kelvin won't kill my father until he's tortured that secret out of him. The danger is in Dad going berserk and trying to wipe them out. Which is what, I think, he is planning to do. I think he was right about Kelvin's next move being to put the squeeze on him through me. When Kelvin learns I'm gone, he'll have to dig up a new angle. Meanwhile we've got to keep father from jumping them."

Dunc frowned. "With you out of the way, I'd lay my money on his opening up on them the next time they ride up to the house. That'd give him surprise and his best chance."

"Exactly. That's what I think he means to do. So we've got to keep them away from there."

"How?"

"With a lure like the gold!"

"You mean to dig it up?"

She shook her head. "From what we heard, I expect that'd be quite a job. But we could make it look as if it had been dug up. Simply by leaving a pile of fresh dirt around somewhere."

"Which would take Kelvin straight to your place. He'd figure Carter Hume dug it."

"If we let him think that way. Dunc, are you game to let him think that you dug it up?"

Dunc was staring again. "You forget that Kelvin killed my brother. I'm game for anything that'll give me a chance at him."

Roxana smiled. "But it'd be as dangerous for you to go up against four of those killers as it would be for father. We've got to build us a very careful trap. And that's got me stumped."

"Sleep on it," Dunc said. "Meanwhile, I've got some spuds to peel. I've got to cook chow for twenty or thirty hungry stage passengers."

"I'm helping you," Roxana said briefly.

Dunc insisted that she get some rest, because he wanted to be alone for a while to think. He was astonished at his own reaction to the information Hume had conveyed. A fortune in gold, and within a couple of hundred feet of him!

When Roxana had reluctantly retired to the bedroom, he went out onto the porch for a

pail of water, and he paused there, measuring those thirty-one paces east of the falls with his eye. The base of the cliff was heavily buried in detritus now, but his pulses skipped a beat as he noted a partly buried fissure in the cliff face. Those many long years ago, that crack, now running under the talus, had probably been exposed. It would take digging, but what man wouldn't undertake it eagerly for a hundred thousand dollars worth of old trail-wolf treasure!

He shook his head, as if to clear the thought from his mind. Yet he couldn't help thinking of all the years, the freezing winters and blistering summers, he had put in trying to grub a living from a two-bit cow spread.

"They'll never get it!" he told himself savagely and was surprised at his vehemence. He turned and went back into the kitchen.

It was while he was doing the morning chores at the barn that a plan began to shape in Dunc's mind. He got back to the station to find that Roxana was up again and taking over the preparations for the noon meal.

"I'm too excited to sleep," she announced firmly.

Dunc said eagerly, "I think mebbe you had a good idea about trying to draw Kelvin's bunch down here into a trap. I wouldn't be at all surprised but what he keeps a man on the rimrock to watch what goes on here. So if you're going to cook, I'm going to do a little shovel work outside."

She looked at him in quick excitement. "It's dangerous! You'd better be sure of your play. Kelvin's got three killers stringing along with him."

"That's just the point," Snell said quickly. "So far as Kelvin knows that treasure's still in the form of bullion. He thinks it's only a matter of locating it and digging it up. I'm going to coyote into the bank like a dog scrabbling dirt. I've got a feeling it'll draw them back here quick. We'll let them poke around that coyote hole, and I'll dig it big enough for two or three of them to get in there at once. Then we'll pin them there by slamming a hot-lead door on them!"

"It might work," Roxana said thoughtfully. "But Kelvin'd know that if you'd found out about the bullion, you'd also know that's what he's been prowling around here for. They'll be mighty leery."

"I don't think they'll realize there're two of us here. You could give a pretty good impression of being me poking around behind the blinds while I wait for them out back. But you've got to realize that if something slips, we're both in a tight. Are you game?"

The answer was ready and assured. "Of course. After watching them hold my father and beat him senseless, I'm ready to risk anythings."

DUNC fell to work immediately. He hadn't told Roxana everything he intended to accomplish. That gold, fused into the fissure, was a long way down and would require a lot of digging. No wolf-trail pack was going to ride in and take it away with it in a matter of hours. It might require days to locate it, and there would still be the considerable job of picking and prying the metal out of the crevice. Rather than to set his coyote-hole trap at some false location, he decided to put it directly over the deposit, killing two birds with one stone.

For Dunc Snell knew that he was going to dig up that gold as soon as his hands were free. He would have earned his share in it, not only because it had cost Tod Snell his life, but also because he was apt to have to put up the biggest fight of his own life for it and at the same time to protect the girl. Hume had said that the bullion had been wrested from a crooked dealer, over twenty years before, collected by him from road agents operating in half a dozen states and territories. There would be no sure way of locating the lawful owners. The stuff was real trove, and he had a stake in it. After the showdown he would claim his share of it.

He paced off the thirty-one steps from the falls, clinging to the talus slope, then fell to work with pick and shovel. The detritus dug easily, though it was thickly mixed with rocks that had tumbled down the face of the cliff. He cut a six-by-six face in the talus, then began to tunnel back. As the sun mounted, sweat began to pour from him though the mountain air was cool, and a trembling excitement was continually in him.

It seemed logical that Rufe Kelvin would be keeping an eye on this site, but even if the new digging was not discovered immediately it would make no material difference. Sooner or later it would be observed, and when it was, Dunc meant to be ready. He could command this spot from a back window of the station. The coyote would be bound to draw at least one of them; with luck, two or three, and he could spring his ambush, and any reduction in the odds would be welcome.

At eleven o'clock Dunc knocked off work and scrubbed away the last telltale trace of dirt. He changed into fresh clothes and went into the kitchen.

"You better tuck yourself away somewhere now, Roxana," he told the girl. "The stage'll be coming along in another half hour. I'll feed 'em, but after they've gone you can wash the dishes while I get to digging again."

Roxana looked at him closely. "Dunc, you're digging your hole right over the gold. Wouldn't it be better some place else?"

He grinned. "They'll never be able to hang around long enough to get it out, even so. And I hate to waste work."

"Oh, Dunc, do you mean to dig it up?"

"I mean to get Rufe Kelvin and his men off our necks!" Dunc said, a little too savagely.

She regarded him a moment. "What is there in men that makes the thought of wealth put such a mad fever into them?" She turned swiftly and disappeared into the bedroom.

The eastbound stage rattled in just at noon, and Dunc was too busy to think of anything else but getting the customers off his hands again. Elmer Olden noticed the new digging immediately, and when he came into the kitchen from the barn he asked, "Chasing a gopher, Dunc?"

"Fooling with the idea of a root-cellar. To keep the spuds from freezing, come winter."

"Figure to last till winter, huh?" the old man cackled, and went on in to eat.

In a moment of cooler reasoning, Dunc realized that the sensible thing, right now, would be to send word, by Olden, to the deputy sheriff in Wolseyville and have a couple of men rushed out to help him spring his proposed trap. Yet he could see no way of accomplishing that without letting the cat out of the bag, the secret that too many men shared already. He let the stage rock on down the east side of the mountain, and passed the westbound through.

When the last of them had gone, Dunc looked in through the bedroom door and discovered that Roxana was asleep on his bed. Smiling to himself, he closed the door gently and took time to clear the big table and wash the dishes before he went back to his digging.

Just before three o'clock the sudden sharp clatter of horses' hoofs on the road jerked him erect. Hiding his pick and shovel in the hole, Dunc raced for the station. Roxana was still in the bedroom. Dunc turned on through the big front room and froze. The horsemen were not passing, as he had hoped, but had pulled up in front.

Chapter V

GOLDEN BACKFIRE

THE hair on Dunc's neck seemed to lift as he stepped through the door. There were four riders, shaggy, ugly-eyed, unsmiling. One man stood out, a giant astride a big grey stallion. He was regarding Dunc appraisingly, keeping a hand close to the grip on one of his twin guns. *Rufe Kelvin,* Dunc thought desperately. *They've taken the play away from me!*

The leader grinned without warmth. "Howdy. How's chances for a bait of grub before we ride on, fella?"

Dunc nodded, sullenly. The law of the open country made it mandatory that he show hospitality, and to deny the request would indicate clearly that he was suspicious.

He said, "Sure. Light down and water your broncs. I've got stuff left over from feeding the stage crowd at noon."

Neither mounts nor riders showed sign of long travel. It was Rufe Kelvin, and food was not his interest here, even though the four tried to look like wayfarers. They swung down and began to rack their horses. Dunc had been caught unarmed. The sleeping, unwarned girl might awaken at any moment, and if Kelvin found out she was here. . . .

Kelvin entered the station without invitation, the others close behind. They gave the main room a brief inspection and headed toward the kitchen. Forcing himself to relax, Dunc threw a few chunks of wood into the stove, pulling left-over kettles of food forward to heat.

Kelvin asked, "Where kin we wash up?" and without waiting for an answer went on through to the back porch. Dunc bit his lip. If they hadn't already been aware of the excavation, they saw it now. They washed, talking together in low tones, and by the time they came back into the kitchen Dunc had dished up three plates of warmed-over beans and potatoes and set them on the work table.

"Coffee in a minute."

They fell to eating, whether or not they were actually hungry, and Dunc debated the advisability of slipping into the bedroom on some pretext and trying to warn Roxana. Yet Kelvin was watching closely. Dunc could hardly breathe as he kept hoping that the girl's deep fatigue would keep her sleeping soundly for hours yet.

Desperately, while realizing the futility of trying to convey a lack of suspicion, he asked, "Traveling far?"

"Tolerable." Rufe Kelvin swallowed a mouthful of food, watching Dunc fixedly. "What're you digging for out back?"

"Root cellar."

Kelvin grinned, exchanged glances with the others. Dunc appraised them. One was runty, but the other two were big, lacking Kelvin's immense stature, but solid and tough. All wore tied-down, double guns.

Then Rufe Kelvin tossed his bombshell. "So old man Hume told you all about it before he died?"

Dunc couldn't help staring. "Died? What do you mean?"

"Mean to say you didn't know he's dead?"

"I didn't."

"Well, he is. We was there, just before noon, and he's cold as ice. Died in his chair. Old age, I reckon." And the man grinned again.

A pulse began throbbing in Dunc's neck as the awful implication hit him. They could be

trying to deceive him, but he didn't think so. It was entirely possible. The old man was dead. Carter Hume had suffered two terrible beatings, a terrific strain on his heart. Maybe he had had some premonition of what was coming when he had told Dunc his story and asked help in getting Roxana out to civilization. He must have had.

Snell was caught in a hopeless position. Armed with hindsight, he cursed himself for marking out the location of the treasure so exactly. He was caught unarmed. There was a good possibility that nobody would be along before stage time, the next day. The four of them could do a lot of digging in that time. And sooner or later they would discover Roxana.

Kelvin spoke again. "The only thing we want out of you, fella, is this: did that girl of Hume's take the stage out, today?"

"Why—why—she was here around stage time, all right! I was busy with my work. I didn't notice who all left!" He clung frantically to the slim hope that he could keep them from realizing Roxana was in the bedroom.

"You were a damned fool to start digging in the daytime, kid. Pretty anxious to get your hands on that stuff, huh?"

"I told you I was digging a root cellar! I meant to buy fresh vegetables from old man Hume to put more variety in the meals, here! What do you think I could be digging for 'round here?"

"Fish bait," Kelvin said, and laughed again.

DUNC had the feeling that he might have persuaded them a little that he knew nothing of Carter Hume's affairs. If only Roxana would hear the talking out here and be forewarned before she betrayed her presence!

Kelvin finished eating and rose. He plainly dominated the others, for they rose hastily, with a loud scraping of chairs. Kelvin paced toward Dunc and seized him by the shirt front, twisting and lifting him easily onto his toes.

"You mean you ain't talked to Hume lately?"

"I mean no such thing. I was down there, last night. We chinned. He looked bunged up and said he got into an argument with some tough customers. I didn't realize he was that bad off."

"Old man Hume wasn't in the habit of chinning with anybody, fella!" Kelvin said softly. "If he was willing to talk to you it was because he had something important to tell you. We figure it that way, and we're going on down where you started to dig. You can keep right on doing the cooking for us. We'll be outta here by stage time, tomorrow. If you behave yourself, you *might* not get hurt." He wiped his whiskery mouth with the back of a big hand. "Where you keep your hardware? We want it."

"In the bedroom," Dunc said hastily. "I'll get it."

"You get it, Curly."

Dunc's heart sank, though he realized that if he hadn't offered to produce the sixgun they would have searched until they found it. Dunc measured the situation as the man Curly turned toward the bedroom door. Their weapons were all holstered, but he knew that there would be a baleful plenty of them in evidence should he make a reckless move. Curly went through the door and instantly let out a laugh.

"Come look, Rufe, at what's sleeping purty as a picture on the bed!"

Kelvin paced to the door, took a quick look and grinned. "Leave her sleep. You stay in here with them, Curly, while Bob and me get to digging. Hank, you keep a eye on the road." He turned back to Dunc, still grinning. "I think mebbe you'll be good now, huh?"

While the others went outside, Curly dropped back into a kitchen chair, but a walnut-handled six hung free and clear on either side. He tilted back, hooking a boot-heel over a chair rung. "Fixing yourself up pretty, huh, kid? All the old man's treasure and his purty daughter! Damme if it don't seem too bad that we come along to spoil it for you!"

"You had a man spying on us from the rim, did you?"

"Sure, but we never guessed about the girl. We come down this morning, figuring to give her a little job in helping oil the old coot's tongue. The old man was dead and she was gone. We figured she might of meant to take the stage out, in which case we was going to take her off again down the line where it wouldn't bring a lot of people messing around this place. Then we seen you digging. We had a purty good idea what you had in mind. We couldn't tell for sure whether the girl went out or not. As soon as the coast was clear, we come down."

"You still don't know Carter Hume told me anything. Mebbe I was just trying for a lucky shot. You might dig for the rest of the summer."

"In which case, you'll be sorry, bub."

The man Kelvin had called Hank had taken up an indolent stance on the front porch, where he could watch the road. Kelvin and the grey-haired individual called Bob had gone out to the coyote hole and were examining it with interest, and talking. As he digested the situation, Dunc realized that there was still a faint ray of hope. They'd never have that gold uncovered and wrenched from its rocky vise by stage time, tomorrow. They could not prevent the stages, and all their passengers, from coming through. There was the possibility that, while they were making themselves scarce

Kelvin fixed the set-up carefully fifteen minutes before the first stage was due. Roxana offered no objection to making a bull's-eye of herself, found a book and went out to sit in the rocker one of the men carried to the shaded area behind the station. While he set the table to serve noon dinner, Dunc found that his hands were trembling.

Promptly at twelve Billy Waite came up the long slant with the eastbound, picking up speed on the flat summit and rolling into the yard in a cloud of dust. Looking through the kitchen window, Dunc saw that he carried a light load, not more than six passengers. Dunc's eyes fastened hungrily on the sixgun on Waite's hip, but he pushed that thought from his mind. The Concord was in plain view from the cave where Kelvin's men were hidden. They would have noted this weapon, and would be watching carefully when the coach loaded again and Waite mounted the box.

Assuring himself that his more cautious plan was better, Dunc went quietly about his routine duties. He had a chance to speak with Waite when the latter came through the kitchen on his way to eat, and again when he helped bring fresh spans from the barn. He held his tongue until the last moment, when the passengers were reloaded and he was alone with Waite on the blind side of the stage for an instant.

"Billy, when you meet Elmer Olden down the road I want you to be sure and tell him I've got four stinking polecats trapped in my new root cellar. Tell him I want him to stop at old man Hume's and bring up an exterminator."

Waite nodded, glanced idly toward the cave, but without suspicion, as he mounted to the box. Then the teams stirred, and the Concord went rattling on its way.

Chapter VII

DAMNATION DAY

IT WAS the most suspensive short period of time Dunc had ever experienced as he waited for Elmer Olden to get in with the westbound, but the fact that Olden came in so late reassured him that the testy old driver had got his meaning. Kelvin and his men did not emerge from the coyote-hole, not knowing at what moment the westbound might come rattling up the grade. The girl sat quietly in her chair, pale and still as a graven image. There was no way Dunc could communicate with her to try and bring her some small cheer.

Then Olden pulled in. Dunc was certain the old man had divined his message when he stopped the coach at a point where it was cut from view by the back corner of the station. The passengers moved inside in their usual casual manner. Olden went around to the rear boot, and through a window Dunc saw him lift a burlap-wrapped package from it. The old man came in by the front door and, entering the kitchen, left the package on a chair without comment, went back out the way he had entered and began to unhitch his teams. One glance was enough to assure Dunc it was what he had hoped for: both of Carter Hume's Frontier model Colts, with a box of spare shells.

He got his first chance to talk with Olden when he accompanied him to the stable to bring up fresh horses. Once they were inside the barn, the old man grinned coldly and grunted: "What you got, kid?"

"Four mean-eyed owlhooters. They're the killers, Elmer, and they're holding down on the girl to make sure I don't try a trick. So you gotta get hitched and rolling."

Olden frowned worriedly. "Bub, that's a big job and you need help."

"You just get your passengers outa here before lead starts to fly! You couldn't find any help to send short of Thistle Hills, and it won't keep that long."

"I got the drift from what Billy told me," Olden said. "Did you know old man Hume's dead? Cold in his chair! When I coupled that with the message you sent, I knew just about what was up here."

"That's how I figured it'd work."

Dunc helped hitch the fresh horses to the stage. He reasoned that Kelvin would keep himself and his men out of sight for a few minutes after the coach rolled away. In those few precious moments, Dunc had to make his own final preparations. As Elmer Olden swung up into the box, Dunc turned into the kitchen.

With one gun shoved into his waistband and the other in his right hand, Dunc picked up the hand mirror he had taken from Roxana's valise and ran on tiptoe out the front and around the east end of the building. He hesitated there a second, making certain that he was cut from view from within the shallow tunnel. To his relief, Roxana sent no betraying glance in his direction. He studied the position of the sun.

He waited thus, eyes clamped to the mouth of the coyote-hole. The crisis that Rufe Kelvin had dreaded was past. They'd be relaxing in there. The gunsights would waiver away from Roxana as they prepared to crawl out and resume their work.

Cautiously Dunc picked up the bright sun on the polished surface of the mirror, throwing a bright disc on the cliff, high above the newly dug cave. Roxana failed to notice it, and he was forced to flick the light swiftly against her face, lifting it again instantly. She glanced his way, spotted him but proved herself too smart to give any sign. When he was sure she

The outlaws kept up their game until midnight, drinking continually but failing to show any marked effect from it. A score of times Dunc weighed his chances of cutting loose in unarmed, berserk action, in the hope of gaining one of their guns for himself, but they gave him not the slightest opportunity. Then the game broke up and, rising, Kelvin growled to his men, "You buzzards kin go sleep in the barn."

Curly glared, and for a moment they stared at each other. Then Curly turned with a shrug and followed the other two. Kelvin glanced at Roxana. "Go to bed, miss. Your boy friend and me'll roll up here in the kitchen."

Though his eyes grew unbearably heavy with sleep, as the night wore away, Dunc dared not relax his vigilance. He kicked out a blanket on the floor, near Roxana's door, and stretched on it. Noting this with an amused look, Kelvin unrolled his soogans at the other end of the room, relying on the intervening space to warn him should Dunc make a move.

Any number of times Dunc was tempted to try it, but Kelvin had left the lamp burning. Even though he might get across the room without being drilled by quick, savage lead, the racket would rouse those in the barn. After that they would not be disposed to patience. It was an understanding of this that had made Kelvin consider it unnecessary to post a guard. Dunc waited in brooding deliberation.

The outlaws began to stir as the dawn brightened. Roxana came out of the bedroom, and Dunc could see that she had not rested. As for himself, a tremendous weariness weighted him, dulling his mind into quietude at last. He helped the girl fix breakfast, and afterward the grey-whiskered Bob escorted him to the barn to tend to the horses. Kelvin and Hank returned to the coyote-hole and resumed digging, with Curly watching the road. Scanning ahead to noontime, when the stages would be through, Dunc began to glimpse the first rough outlines of a plan.

He sought out Kelvin. "I can tell you you won't be through here by stagetime. I take it you want me to have dinner ready and everything looking normal?"

"That's right . . . if we're still here."

"You will be if you want to take Bloody Creager's gold with you. It's a long ways down. Creager melted that bullion and poured it down a crevice. He figured it was at least ten feet under the surface. You not only got to locate that crevice but you've got to dig it out when you find it. Then you've got to drill the gold loose from the rock."

Kelvin regarded him intently. "That straight?"

Dunc shrugged. "It's what old man Hume told me. I'm just warning you you'll be at it for days."

He returned to the station with a certain grim satisfaction. He had divulged the information for a specific purpose, to give Kelvin time to plan for such a contingency. Meanwhile, he was placing himself in Kelvin's place and trying to figure out what he would do under the circumstances. A feeling of elation began to build in him.

He and Roxana made preparations for the noon meal, but the lookout kept a close eye on them. Then something Dunc had not dared to hope for developed. Sound to eastward revealed a freighting outfit tooling slowly up the grade.

IT THREW Kelvin and his men into action. They plunged into the station; Kelvin seized Dunc by the shirt front, glaring at him. "Go out there and keep them from coming inside, mister! And if you get the itch to try something smart, just remember we're keeping the girl in here with us!"

Dunc lifted an eyebrow. "All right, but you won't be able to keep the stage bunch from coming in. Or into the barn, either."

"We'll worry about that when the time comes."

The freight wagons did not stop. Dunc waved from the front porch and the teamsters waved back, but time seemed to be pressing them and they rolled on over the summit and away down the westward grade. To this point Dunc was satisfied; he was getting in some precious spade work and the unhoped for incident had helped.

At eleven-thirty Kelvin came into the kitchen again. "This is how we're going to work it, fella! You'll treat them stage people no different than you ever have. You won't try to tip 'em off that anything's out of the way here. Because me and the boys'll be hid in that coyote. Roxana here's going to be setting out in the shade in the back, reading a book. You just remember she'll have four pairs of sights lined on her purty little bussum."

Excitement leaped in Dunc but he managed to remain outwardly dull and sullen.

"Well!" Rufe Kelvin snapped. "Do you get it?"

"Yeah. I get it."

The outlaw went out, and Dunc whispered to Roxana. "You'll do exactly what he said, Roxie! I've bet the works on my guess that he doesn't realize that the stage drivers don't know you've been staying here! He figures you've got to be in evidence. Otherwise he would have taken you and cleared out till afternoon!

The girl nodded, puzzled. "But what am I to do?"

Dunc grinned. "Like he said. There's a book around, someplace. All you gotta do is sit there with four guns on you and read it."

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recognized his intention, Dunc turned the dazzling white spot full into the mouth of the cave.

Roxana went sideways out of her chair and scrambled for the corner. A curse exploded inside the cave, but Dunc knew that he had them pinned there momentarily with a blinding curtain of light. He kept it there steadily with his left hand, while the gun in his right hand opened up.

The first shot drew a yell of pain, then a volume of wild and panicky return fire. Dunc's stratagem had thrown them into danger. They were murderously exposed where they were, and to emerge they had to penetrate that curtain of blinding light, fully targeted.

Dunc dropped the mirror after he had reaped its maximum benefit and drew the second gun from his waistband. He flattened the first man to emerge, then the pair behind spread at the cave mouth, not trying to find cover but coming at him, sixguns bucking in their hands. Lead smashed into the logs above Dunc's head as he cut another man down. Then Rufe Kelvin emerged. Each of Dunc's arms jarred now to his steady firing. He was aware of a searing touch on the side of his head as he felled another man. Surprise and relief hit him simultaneously when Kelvin fell.

IT WAS evening before they had matters straightened out down at the Hume place. They found Carter Hume dead, as he had been reported to be, and Dunc carried him to his bed and covered him. He helped Roxana milk the suffering cows and tend to the other chores. Just before he left to return to the stage station, Dunc said, "You're safe now, Roxie—forever, I hope. I'll send word to the sheriff tomorrow to come out with the coroner."

Roxana studied his face intently. "Dunc, it probably won't be necessary to reveal what the trouble was over. We could just claim Kelvin and his men were old enemies of my father's, that you got rung into it, like the other station keepers, through trying to protect me. You've more than earned a share in that gold. I don't want any of it."

He lifted her chin and smiled at her. "I've seen plenty of what Carter Hume meant by its power for evil, Roxie. We'll dig it up in time, all right, but we'll turn it over to a good cause. I found gold here, though—real gold. I've never seen a spot I'd rather settle on. I've got a little cow outfit over east of the Smokies. I'd like to sell out and buy in havers with you. And later, when you've forgotten these last days, I'd like to make it a bigger partnership than that. Will I get a hearing, Roxie?"

She smiled gently as she offered her hand. "Don't think you need to ask that, Dunc."

THE END

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(Continued from page 74)

door. He never reached it, for Curly came off the sofa silently and with piston-driven suddenness and crooked an elbow around the tall man's throat, pinioning him in a grip that strangled the yell on Frawley's lips.

But Frawley squirmed out of that hammerlock and whirled. Curly had known he couldn't hold the tall man long—he had himself well-braced therefore. When Frawley tried to draw his gun, Curly hit him hard above the buckle of his belt.

The blow drove the wind out of the tall man and his mouth opened and his arms sagged, fingers fanwise across his stomach. He doubled up with a jerk. Curly hit him in the jaw as hard as he could swing. Frawley's head snapped back and he fell in a loose-limbed sprawl and did not move again.

Curly pivoted on his heels, facing the table, the chain-hung lamp above it, the two men beneath in its arc of yellow light. He jumped forward, dropping on one knee beside his father who still was trying to rise. Curly slid an arm beneath the old man's chest, lifting him, helping.

"Dad!" he said in an anguished voice. "Get up—get on your feet!"

At that moment Yocum, who had watched Frawley go down, found his wits and clapped a hand to Curly's shoulder, spinning him off balance. "Let him be!" Yocum yelled furiously. And Curly saw him go for the bulge under his black box coat.

Curly tried to get his feet under him, tried to rise. But the lawyer was quick. Yocum aimed a fist at Curly's face that jarred Curly backward to the floor, his head tipped back.

In that stunned moment while he got to his hands and knees, he expected to hear the blast of Yocum's gun. When it didn't come, he stared at the lawyer from a crouch, and saw Yocum bending again above Big John. He lunged at the lawyer from his crouch, striking the man in a sidewise stagger.

But Yocum had drawn his gun. He held it in his right hand and swung the barrel at Curly's head. The room shook as both men fell to the floor and rolled apart. Blinded by the gun's glancing blow, Curly got to his hands and knees for the second time and remained like that, his head lopping down between trembling arms that supported his weight.

Boots scraped the floor. Boots kicked at Curly, battering him in the ribs, in the jaw. Yocum, on his feet first, attacked with an insane fury, kicking, slashing with the barrel of his gun.

Something happened inside Curly as he took that punishment for a moment and then rolled

clear of the thrashing boots and swinging gun. His fury felt like fire in his brain. He hurled himself at Yocum's legs, tackling him, jerking the big man down in a crashing fall.

Curly knew then that the reason he had always avoided violence was because some part of him had always known what violence could make of himself when once he was aroused.

This knowledge came simultaneously with his next act. He threw himself on top of the floundering lawyer. Blindly he reached with his hands. His fingers sank deeply into a tough, pliant substance; and when he could see, he saw that it was Yocum's throat he had in that iron-hard grip. The lawyer, choking, gasping, gagging, sagged to the floor. The gun in his hand went off thunderously, the flame of it an inch from Curly's face.

Curly dashed the weapon out of Yocum's hand, and it slid off with a clatter across the floor. Then Curly began slugging the big man in the face. Yocum bellowed, his eyes shut tight, his mouth twisted out of shape.

Outside the house, yelling voices started up. A gunshot banged the night, then a tremendous explosion shook the air, the blast of a double-barreled scatter-gun going off. It was followed a few seconds later by another report fully as loud as the first, and the echo seemed to fill the house. Curly sensed vaguely that the weapon was being fired from the kitchen ell, from inside the house at men in the yard.

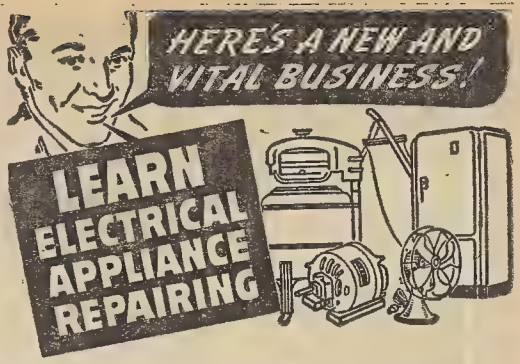
Curly started to rise, for Yocum was unconscious under him. Then, suddenly, a hairy arm went around Curly's neck and pulled him over on his back.

Curly stared upward. The man who had yanked him off Yocum was Tip Casheen! The foreman stood there, bent at the waist, a revolver in his hand and angled down at Curly's chest. Casheen's eyes were slitted tight. They weren't the eyes of a human being. They were killer's eyes.

Propped on one elbow, Curly had the queerly calm thought, *Well, here it comes.* But when the shot came it didn't come from Casheen's gun—it came from behind Curly, one swift report that left a deafened silence in the room.

Casheen had his head tipped as he sighted along the barrel of his gun. His head stayed that way as the shot came, as though he hadn't heard a thing, and was slowly, ponderously, falling over backward. As his contorted face passed backward through lamplight, his expression changed. And when he struck the floor, back down, his face was strangely, incongruously calm.

Curly jerked his head around toward the spot where his father lay half under the table, on the floor. For a long, strained moment,



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the silence held, while Curly stared and saw Big John's sprawling frame supported on elbows, Yocum's revolver propped up in his bony hands, one eye squinting along the gleaming barrel. A tiny wisp of bluish smoke curled up lazily from the muzzle of the gun that had brought Casheen down, a dead man, to the floor.

THEY were in the kitchen at Broken Bit a half hour after Yocum and Tip Casheen's crew had fogged the trail to War Pass: Curly, Big John and Letty Sloan.

The girl had just canted the double-barreled shotgun against the wall, the weapon she had used to frighten off the outlaws in the yard.

"They may come back," she said in a breaking voice, her dark eyes pinned on Curly's lean, grim face.

Curly put his father's rifle on the table, turned and took the girl in his arms as she came to him. He felt her body tremble against him, heard the sobs start. Tears ran down her cheeks and fell warm against his hands.

"No," he said in his slow and reassuring drawl, "they've gone for good. And Casheen's dead—there's nothing more to fear."

"They found your hat in the buckboard." She clung to him in her moment of weakness and reaction. "That's why Frawley made me wait on the porch to bait you in."

Curly tightened his arms about her, said softly, "Letty, you're wonderful!"

"That ain't the word for Letty, son." It was Big John speaking from the table where he sat, head bowed on his crossed forearms. "She's the bravest gal we'll ever get to know. If it hadn't been for Letty I'd of went ravin' mad these past few weeks!"

Curly looked toward his father, and in that moment knew something that he had only guessed at before: that Big John wasn't, hadn't been, as drunk as he had pretended to be, that he had made a case of sodden drunkenness against himself to accomplish something that sober he could not have gotten away with.

Feeling a surge of compassion for Big John, Curly murmured, "We'll get you in bed, dad. Tomorrow you can talk, and tell me what went on."

The face his father showed to them with Curly's words was haggard with suffering, but slowly, surely, loosening with relief. "I ain't bad drunk," Big John said almost defiantly. "Spit out most of the booze they kept pourin' into me." He coughed a few times, then went on determinedly, "You come in the nick of time, boy. They had me 'tween the Devil and a hard place. Couldn't call my soul my own. And that Casheen wouldn't let me out of his

sight alone, wouldn't let me talk to anyone, not even to Letty. They wanted my signature on a bill of sale. Wanted it legal so they could take the outfit over, herd and all. They was goin' to have me declared insane if I didn't sign. That's why they made me drink that—" He broke off, shuddering.

Something inside Curly turned over as his father spoke his harsh words. An impulse smothered whatever scorn he might have had until this moment. He said, "Dad, it was all my fault. Shouldn't never have gone away that time."

And he realized that Big John had always ruled by power, had lived by it until a greater force, a sinister force, had nearly crushed and ruined him. Curly felt the misery that had made its havoc in so old a man; and, for the first time in his own life, he knew pity and affection for one in whom he had always stood in a kind of superstitious awe.

For the first time in his life, Curly Birch began to feel his kinship with Big John. And with this awareness, with the triumphant thought that nothing but the future mattered now, peace came to Curly, and to Broken Bit.

Curly held Letty in his arms, and the grin he gave her as she raised her face to his, hurt the bruised and stiffened muscles of his jaw. But Letty's tears had gone; there was softness in her eyes, a glad radiance. She touched his cheeks where the blows he had taken had raised their bluish welts.

In the warmth and light of the kitchen, with danger forgotten, with menace gone, feeling her hands on his face, Curly heard her murmured words, "I, *too,* am glad you're home."

"Why, sure," he said around a tightness in his throat. "Why sure. And so am I!" And then he swallowed hard and thought, *If I don't watch out I'll bust down bawlin' like a kid!*

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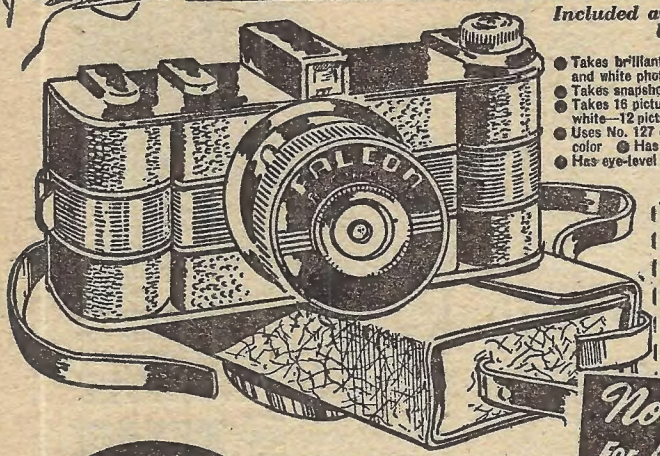

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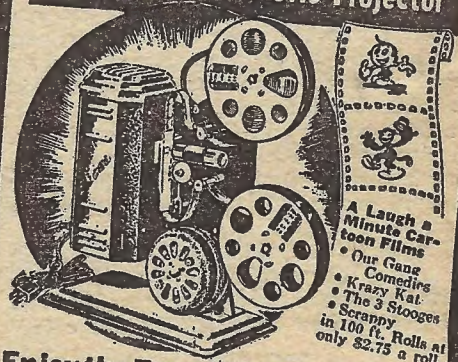

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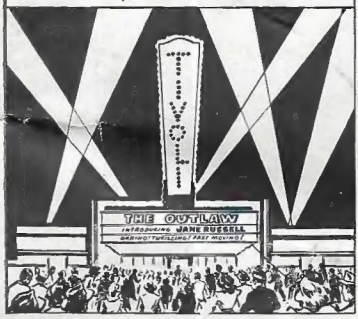
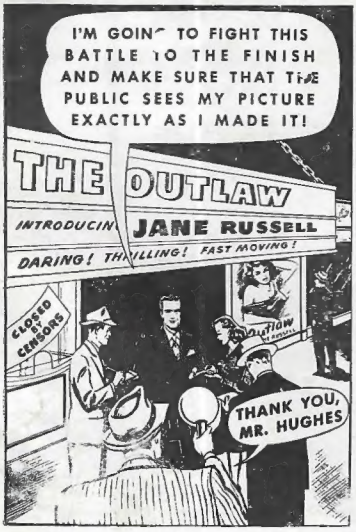


THE OUTLAW IS TRIGGER-FAST ACTION **COMBINED WITH DARING SENSATION TOO STARTLING TO DESCRIBE!**

THEN...**THE OUTLAW** IS BANNED BY THE CENSORS! BUT RATHER THAN CUT A SINGLE SCENE FROM THE FILM, **HOWARD HUGHES** WITHDRAWS IT FROM THE THEATRES OF THE WORLD.



NOW, AT LAST, AFTER A TWO YEARS FIGHT WITH THE CENSORS, **HOWARD HUGHES** BRINGS YOU HIS DARING PRODUCTION, **THE OUTLAW...EXACTLY AS IT WAS FILMED!! NOT A SCENE CUT!!** AND INTRODUCING A NEW STAR, **JANE RUSSELL!**

"So that's why they took time out between sets"

A DELICIOUS Calvert highball is just about the best thing we know to make winner and loser *both* feel mighty pleased.

For when you serve up Calvert you're scoring with the *real thing* in whiskey. Its pre-war quality is so rich and flavorful, there's no imitating it.

The reason is simple. At Calvert we've blended more fine whiskey in our time than any other distiller in America. And that experience counts!

Want to make *your* service tops? Just be sure that your next highball is made with Calvert. . . . . ***It's the real thing!***

Clear Heads Choose **Calvert**

Calvert Distillers Corp., N.Y.C. BLENDED WHISKEY 86.8 Proof.
Calvert "Reserve"—65% Grain Neutral Spirits... Calvert "Special"—72½% Grain Neutral Spirits